

Here Is The Place Where I Love You

by When The Tide Comes In

Category: H2O: Just Add Water

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Summary: Emma returns to the Gold Coast only to find everything she'd left behind has changed—including her friends. Rikki now managed the old café with Zane, Cleo was struggling to help Lewis through his first tentative steps into fatherhood, and just who is this secretive new mermaid? What is she hiding? Can Emma ever get back the life she left behind? R&R. Clewis, Zikki, Emaash, Wella.

## 1. Prologue

**\*\*story information & a/n:\*\***

the promised rewrite of \_when the rain pours in,\_ dedicated to the water beneath my fins and the lewis to my zane; mimmie (mermaidbyheart). ily dear! this fic is set a little after episode 3x12, crime and punishment and told from mostly cleo and emma's povs. i dropped the witch subplot and decided to focus mainly on emma's return, bella's secret, and of course cleo and lewis's relationship as they try to cope with the semi-sudden arrival of elena. the story will end a little after graduation, and after that i'll be writing a sequel. for now i'm going to be updating every five reviews or so, so if you're going to fave/follow please leave your thoughts too! it keeps me motivated. enjoy, darlings. x

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><p><em>here it's safe, and here it's warm<em>  
><em>here the daisies guard you from every harm<em>  
><em>here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true<em>

><em>here is the place where i love you<em>.

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He looked so small standing outside of Claire's room in the

hospital's brightly lit hallway, his tiny new daughter bundled up in a pastel pink blanket and cradled protectively in his arms.

Cleo hadn't got a chance to see the little girl yet. She hadn't even gotten a chance to see Lewis since Claire called almost twenty hours ago saying that her water had broken. "—and even then, with Lewis rushing off to drive her to the hospital, the situation still didn't quite feel real to Cleo. It felt more like a nightmare than anything, one where Lewis was slowly slipping through her fingers, but now, watching from afar as Lewis looked down at his little girl as though she were made of burnished gold, Cleo could feel the unsettling reality starting to sink in. She inhaled shakily, heart still lodged in her throat, as she approached him. He looked different somehow. Smaller, like a lost child in the midst of a crowd. Lewis looked completely overwhelmed and more exhausted than she'd ever seen him before, though being in a delivery room with Claire for hours on end would exhaust anyone. Claire wasn't an easy woman to get along with on the best of days. She was defensive and crass and and had a dry, offensive sense of humor—the complete opposite of Lewis in almost every way. She was beautiful though; Petite frame, often scandalously dressed. Sharp green eyes. Dark hair, nearly coal black, that hung in curls just above her lightly freckled shoulders.

Cleo couldn't help but blame herself for this entire messed up situation. If she'd never told Lewis she \_needed space to figure things out \_after one of their arguments he never would've slept with Claire, Claire would've never called six months later and dropped a metaphorical bombshell on Lewis's life— Guilt weighed heavy on Cleo's heart. She felt responsible for essentially \_ruining \_Lewis's life. He didn't even officially graduate for another two and half weeks (although he wasn't actually in classes anymore, all he had to do was turn a project in at the end of the term and then he'd have his diploma). "—but Lewis was at fault here too, she tried to rationalize. She couldn't let herself take the entire blame. Cleo didn't make him sleep with Claire, he'd done so just to blow off steam and \_God \_did Cleo want to be mad at Lewis for that. She wanted to scream and throw things and shove him hard in the chest and then she wanted to cry and say she was sorry and that she loved him more than anything. Cleo couldn't find it in herself to be angry with him though. She was the one who told Lewis she needed space. She was the one who said they needed time apart. Lewis had every right to go looking for comfort somewhere else. Cleo just never expected things to end up— here, in some stark white hospital hallway that reeked of antiseptic and latex.

"Hi." Cleo said timidly.

Lewis looked away from his little girl and smiled softly at Cleo. Wetness was gathered in his tired eyes. "Hi."

Cleo peered down at the newborn and allowed herself a little smile too. "She's beautiful."

The little girl really was. She had a skiff of Lewis's blond hair and a set of dark green-grey eyes, already open and curious.

"She's perfect." Lewis replied, and Cleo found herself smiling a little wider. Not even twenty minutes old and Lewis's heart was already wrapped around his daughter's itty bitty little finger. \_

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"What's her name?"

"Elena. Elena Allison."

"Elena Allison McCartney," Cleo said aloud, testing the name on her tongue. "It's beautiful. Everything about her is just beautiful, Lewis."

"I'm scared." He admitted. "I'm absolutely terrified."

"It's okay." She reassured him. "It's going to be okay, Lewis. You've got me. You've got my dad and Sam. You've got Rikki and Bella and Will and Zane. We're not going to let you go through this alone."

\_We're not going to treat you how you're family treated you.\_ Went unsaid, left to hang thickly in the air between them. \_You are not your father and you never will be. You are a good man and, regardless of everything they said and did to you, you are worthy of love.\_

"You don't have to do this, Cleo." Lewis began, voice threatening to tremble. "Support me, I mean. I know you've got to be angry at me. I'm your boyfriend and I've got a kid with another woman. I justâ€¦ I felt soâ€¦" He sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. For everything."

"You don't have to apologize Lewis. I'm not angry with you. I'm upset, yeah. Really upset. It's going to take me a long time to get over this, but I'm not angry and I'm not going to abandon you or Elena. I was the one who said I needed space to figure things out. I just didn't know what I wanted for myself, I still don't, but you know what I do know? That I'm positively, absolutely, one hundred percent sure of? That I want you. We're going to get through this. Someway, somehowâ€¦ We'll find a way to make it. Okay? Besides, what little girl do you know of who doesn't want to meet a real mermaid?"

When Lewis chuckled softly the tears built up in his eyes began to run down his cheeks.

"I don't deserve you." He said. "I really don't."

Cleo leaned in to gently kiss him on the mouth. "You do. You really do. We're a team. Now, if we don't go down to the waiting room to show Elena off I'm pretty sure Bella is going to break down the door. She's so excited she can't sit still."

"Lead the way." He said, smiling tiredly.

She did so gladly, eager to put as much distance between her and Claire's room as possible. Her and Lewis walked together in comfortable silence, Lewis admiring Elena the entire way and speaking sweetly to her. It made Cleo's heart clench warmly.

"You ready?" Cleo asked as they approached the heavy wooden door labeled WAITING ROOM A. Just beneath it, in smaller script, LABOR AND DELIVERY was written.

Lewis nodded. "Ready as I'll ever be."

She held the door open for him as he stepped through the door and into the newest chapter of his life. Parenthood.

## 2. A New Beginning

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\_Three Weeks Later.\_

The highlight of Emma Gilbert's summer was going to be surprising Cleo and Rikki with her arrival home.

Surprising Cleo and Rikki was the one thing she couldn't stop thinking about, and planning down to the very last detail, when her mother had told her they were on their way back to the Gold Coast. She was going to start at the JuiceNet, perhaps catch up with Zane and tell him not to spoil the surprise if she saw him, and if Cleo and Rikki weren't there she was going to show up on their respective doorsteps. Emma couldn't wait to see the look on their faces once she knocked and they opened the door. Her heart fluttered with excitement just thinking about it. She was finally going to have her best friends back, and the first thing they were going to do was swim their tails off.

Standing in the shadow of where the JuiceNet once stood, Emma's mouth gaped. The sign on the new building read \_Rikki's\_ in neon, cursive lettering. It couldn't be referring to her Rikki, could it? Rikki \_Chadwic\_k? Letting curiosity get the better of her, Emma smoothed the front of her white sundress before entering through the beaded doorway. The first thing she noticed was the live band playing.

"\_Cause I'm no ordinary girl, I'm from the deep blow underworld\_," The blonde headed girl with big blue eyes sang, stepping down off the stage to dance through the crowd and sling an arm around Rikki's shoulders. "\_Land or sea; the world's my oyster, I'm the peaaaaarl...No ordinary girl!\_"

Emma furrowed her eyebrows, confused, as Rikki grinned brightly and tried to hide the embarrassed flush creeping up her neck. At least something managed to stay the same; Rikki's hatred of being the center of attention. The strange girl hanging on her, however, didn't seem to have a clue. Emma wasn't sure what to do now. It'd be rude to just swoop in and steal the show, but at the same time Emma hadn't seen Rikki in almost a year and a half. She wasn't in the mood to wait. As the girl let go of Rikki and bounced her way back to the stage Emma quickly crept up behind Rikki and poked her on the shoulder, barely able to contain the dopey grin on her face.

"Can I help yoâ€" " Rikki began as she turned around. "Emma!"

Before Emma could even react Rikki was pulling her in for a hug. \_Since when did Rikki hug anyone?\_ Emma thought, laughing as she returned the hug.

"You didn't tell me you were coming back so soon! I have to call

Cleo, oh my God!"

"Breathe, Rikki." Emma said. "I thought me and you could, ya' know, show up at her house unexpectedly and surprise her."

Rikki beamed. "That's a great idea! Let me go tell Zane I'm taking the rest of the night off and let Bella know they'll be an extra guest at our campout tonight. Be right back!"

As the crowd burst into a round of applause for the band's performance Emma watched Rikki disappear into a back room. It must've been someone's office, Emma guessed. The blonde girl, probably Bella judging by how friendly she was with Rikki, bowed before turning around to say something to the drummer. He looked familiar, but Emma just couldn't put her finger on why... Drummer Boy stood up and stretched his arms upward, still chattering away to Bella, before turning around to face the crowd and

The drumsticks fell from his hands, clattering loudly as they hit the wooden stage, and his face broke out into a blinding smile.

"Emma?!" He asked, leaping down from the stage and crossing the café into three long strides. He yanked her in for a bear-hug.

"Can't. Breathe." Emma said, gently patting the back of whoever was hugging her. He stood back and

"Lewis?" She asked, astounded. "Is that you?"

"You forgot about me already? I'm hurt, Emma. Deeply. I thought we had a connection." He said, feigning offense.

Emma rolled her eyes. "Oh, it's you alright. Gosh, you look... different."

Different was an understatement. The last time Emma had seen Lewis his hair was too long and his shirts were button up and he hadn't quite grown into his legs. Now he was still lean and lithe as he ever, but he'd packed on muscle in all the right places and cut his hair short. His clothes were a lot tighter, too. He was currently dressed in a pair of jeans and a slightly faded black \_The White Stripes\_ t-shirt.

"You do too," He said. "In a good way, of course. You look gorgeous. How was your trip?"

Since when did Lewis have social skills?

"It was fantastic." Emma said with a smile. "Paris, Egypt, Rome, America... You name it, we went there. I couldn't wait to get back home, though. I've missed you guys so much. Speaking of which, where's Cleo?"

"At home, unfortunately. Kim invited her new boyfriend over and Mr. S had some work related emergency to tend too, I don't know what, but Cleo got stuck babysitting them both." He chuckled. "She's spittin' nails."

"That stinks," Emma said, sympathetic. She knew Kim could be a major pain. "Rikki and I are going to go surprise Cleo in a few minutes

actually, you should come with us."

"Sounds great." Lewis said with a grin.

Emma grinned back at him. "Speaking of Cleo, how are you two?"

Something a lot like guilt flickered across Lewis's face before he shrugged and leaned against the wall. "I don't know. We were doing good for a while, but then a little problem from the past reared it's ugly head, which I will explain to you later by the way, and now we're working through some issues. I think we're going to be okay? I don't know. We're taking things day by day right now."

Emma nodded, unsure of what else to say. Thankfully Rikki came striding over and broke her and Lewis's suddenly silence.

"Ooh," Rikki said. "I see you two have reacquainted."

"That we have." Lewis said.

Emma looked down at her feet, ashamed that she couldn't recognize her own best friend. Had she been gone that long? "I didn't even know him. Have I really been away that long?"

"Almost two years, but it doesn't matter, you're back now. C'mon, let's go surprise Cleo." Rikki said.

"Wait, isn't Bella coming?" Lewis asked, looking back toward the stage.

Rikki nodded. "She's meeting us at Mako Island later."

Emma felt her blood run cold. Bella knew? "Mako Island? You told this Bella girl our secret?! How could you be so reckless?!"

"Relax Emma," Rikki said, reassuring her, as they headed outside. "Bella is a mermaid too. Believe me, you can trust her and her boyfriend both."

Emma sighed. "Our secret isn't much of a secret anymore, is it?"

"Oh, don't be like that." Lewis said. "You would not believe the shit that went down while you were gone. There was a \_water tentacle\_."

"...water tentacle?" Emma asked. What on earth happened while she was away?

"Exactly what it sounds like." Rikki said. "A giant tentacle made of water. It attacked all of us on the full moon. It almost kidnapped me once... That's actually how we met Bella. Her and Cleo saved me."

"Wow." Emma said, starting to feel overwhelmed. She was really out of the loop.

"Cleo's dad got remarried." Rikki continued. "His new wife's name is Samantha. She's pretty cool."

Emma shook her head. "Geez, I can't believe I missed so much."

"Don't worry," Lewis said, slinging an arm around Emma's shoulder. He felt like a stranger. "We'll get you caught up."

Emma didn't realize they had arrived at Cleo's house until Lewis knocked on the door. She smoothed her sundress down again and tucked a stray strand of blonde hair behind her ear, filled to the brim with renewed excitement.

"Heeeey Cleo!" Emma said, enthusiastic, as Cleo opened the door.

Cleo shrieked so loudly Kim shouted at her to keep it down from the other room and lunged at Emma for a backbreaking hug. Emma laughed, bright and open, and clinged to her best friend, tears threatening to spill out of her eyes. She couldn't believe just how much she had missed her friends.

"What are you doing here?!" Cleo asked, ushering them all inside. "I thought you were still traveling!"

"Nope!" Emma said, beaming. "Just got home last night. I thought I'd drop in and surprise you all."

"She didn't even recognize me." Lewis said, flopping down on the couch.

"Oh great." Kim said from the kitchen. "My sister's weird friends and even weirder boyfriend are here. Sorry Timmy."

"I heard that!" Cleo shouted back. "Can't you two go outside or something?"

"As you can see," Rikki said to Emma. "Kim is still a pain, and now she's got \_boyfriend\_. Gag."

"I just, I can't believe you're here!" Cleo continued, pulling Emma in for another hug. "We've missed you so so much. Did you have a good time?"

"Yeah, it was great!" Emma said. "I saw so many incredible things but I'm really happy to be home."

Cleo wiped away the wetness in her eyes with the back of her hand. "So, have you met Bella yet? I've been trying to get ahold of you so I could introduce you two."

Emma nodded. "I saw her at the cafe, but I haven't gotten a chance to talk to her yet. Lewis says she's like us?"

"Yup! Don't worry, though. You guys'll get along great." Cleo said.

Emma forced a smile, suddenly feeling very dejected. Had they replaced her? "Can't wait to meet her."

"Great!" Cleo said, clapping her hands together. "We're camping out

on Mako tonight, on the beach! It's going to be so much fun!"

\_I sure hope so\_, Emma thought.

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Emma had forgotten how fantastic it felt to swim, especially in the company of her two best friends. They all took their time on their way to Mako Island, enjoying one another's company and the way the reef looked as it glimmered colorfully in the rays of moonlight casting down through the the surface of the water. By the time they reached Mako, Lewis's boat was already pushed onshore and him and Will were fumbling with the tent. Zane was sitting next to a pile of wood, futilely trying to light it.

"Do you rejects need any help?" Rikki asked as she dragged herself onto the beach and away from the tide. One of the downsides of being a mermaid: having no way to get out of the water when you need to get on the beach. "I can't tell which one of your three is failing the most at what you're doing, it's pretty hilarious."

"Why don't you bring your magic mermaid fire power over here and make yourself useful?" Zane asked, still messing with his lighter.

Rikki rolled her eyes and extended her hand above the wood "within seconds flames burst into existence, setting the logs aflame. "Happy now?"

"Very." He said, yanking her into his land pressing a kiss to her mouth.

After she squealed in surprise, Rikki kissed him back before smacking the back of his head. "Good. Now go help set up the tent. I refuse to sleep under the sky where I could get rained on."

Zane grinned. "Yes, \_mistress\_."

"And don't you forget it!" She called out as Zane made his way over to Lewis and Will. Rikki hoped him and Will could get cooperate long enough to get their sleeping quarters set up. They still fought viciously. It wasn't as though Lewis would help the situation either, given one broke out. Him and Zane had gotten pretty close in the last few months, close enough to call each other in the middle of the night to go do "stupid, probably illegal shit" together as Rikki had put it once, and she \_knew\_ how Lewis got when it came down to loyalties. Rikki almost felt bad for Will, aside from Bella and Cleo and herself, he didn't have much of anyone.

While Cleo and Emma rested on the shoreline and watched the boys pretend to know what they're doing, Bella swam up between them.

"Sorry I'm late, guys." Bella said. "I had to do something for my mum."

Cleo's face brightened. "Bella, hey! This is Emma, the other mermaid I was telling you about."

"Hi!" Bella said with a warm smile, extending her hand. "I'm Bella. The other \_other\_ mermaid."



Emma chuckled and shook her hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Um!" The three of them heard Will call from somewhere within the massive jumble of poles and fabric that was supposed to be their tent. "We could use some assistance!"

"No, we've got it!" Zane called back. "Just keep doing whatever you're doing!"

Will frowned. "Shut up, Zane! We need the help!"

"I will stab you with this pole, Will, I swear to God!" Zane snapped.

"Boys." Cleo said with a groan. "C'mon, lets go fix the mess they've made."

Cleo, Emma, and Bella all dragged themselves out of the water and up onto the beach, away from the tide. While they waited to dry off, Emma looked around. Mako Island, it seemed, was the same as usual. She was thankful for that. Some things she just couldn't handle changing.

It took nearly forty minutes to get their boyfriends untangled from the mess and the tent itself set up. Cleo had borrowed her father's ten sleeper for the night, wanting as much sleeping room as possible, but had not anticipated the complicated set up. She dreaded figuring out how to take the thing down.

"Finally." Rikki said, taking a step back to admire their work. "I'm ready for a freaking nap."

"Not before s'mores, your not!" Bella said, grabbing Rikki by the arm and pulling her toward their campfire. "C'mon!"

Bella was an energetic, bubbly thing and Emma was really starting to warm up to her. It was hard not to feel anything but goodwill toward Bella, there was something very... uplifting about her. Excitable. Maybe Cleo was right, maybe they would get along great.

â€"but at the same time, Emma still felt unsure about Bella. Something in her gut told her Bella was hiding something. Something big.

"Emma, come on!" Cleo called, plopping down next to Rikki by the campfire and gesturing toward the empty spot across from her. "We've got so much to tell you."

Shoving down her suspicious thoughts, Emma sat down in between Bella and Zane and crossed her legs. Cleo had already began rattling on about the previous year, about water tentacles and comets and graduation and everything else under the sun. Emma smiled, for the moment content to listen to stories by firelight and eat s'mores. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Cleo smiling so bright, heard Rikki laugh so genuinely. It was for that reason Emma decided she'd wait until tomorrow evening to ask Cleo and Rikki about Bella a little more... in depth.

What if Bella turned out to be like Charlotte? She didn't seem like

the obsessive power-hungry type, but Emma knew from experience that looks could be deceiving. Forcing a smile, Emma took a bite of her s'more and listened to Cleo's story of how her, Rikki, and Bella apparently saved the world together. She couldn't help but keep one eye on Bella the entire time, unsure about how to feel about her.

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><p><strong>an: \*\*REWRITTEN â€” 10/27/2025.

### 3. Changes In The Tide

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When Cleo's eyes fluttered open Lewis was already awake and staring blankly at the tent's ceiling, seemingly deep in thought.

Confused, Cleo knitted her eyebrows together and propped herself up on one elbow. She figured Lewis would've slept like the dead considering he had a three week old at home. Last night was the first night he'd been baby free in almost a month.

"Lewis?" She asked tiredly, suppressing a yawn. "You okay?"

He looked over at her. "Do you think Elena is okay?"

Quietly amused, Cleo sighed. "Yes Lewis, Elena is perfectly fine. Sam and my dad are very capable. I promise."

When Lewis first brought Elena over to the Sertori's place she'd only been a little over six days old and Cleo was pretty positive Sam wasn't going to give her back. Sam had to have held her for a good two hours, going on endlessly about her big beautiful eyes and her precious little cry and how much she looked like Lewis already. She'd begged him to let her babysit sometime, and Lewis agreed he'd let her once Elena got a little older (the only reason Lewis came on their camping trip to Mako was because Sam was so persistent in spending quality time with Elena). Don, on the other hand, was less than pleased with Elena's arrival and made sure to shoot Lewis dirty looks whenever he got the chance. She had made a mental note to talk to her father later, not only about little Elena but about her and Lewis's relationship as well. She dreaded it though. Lord, did she dread it. Cleo had a feeling, given her boyfriend's new status as a teenage father, Don would try and awkwardly give her the sex talk again. Cleo wanted to cringe just thinking about it. Maybe he'd just go on about the importance of waiting until marriage again (which she planned on doing anyway, thank you very much) and leave it at that.

"I know they are. It's justâ€”" Lewis trailed off, unsure of what to say.

"Separation anxiety?" Cleo finished.

He sat up and scrubbed a hand over his face. "You have no idea."

"She's okay, Lewis. I promise. Would it make you feel better if you called Sam when we got back to the mainland?"

"Yeah, it would."

Cleo crawled over next to him and pressed a chaste kiss to his mouth.

"Then that's what we'll do. But right now you're going to come outside with me and enjoy the sunshine, okay? Enjoy being kid-free for a few hours. You've earned a break. We both have."

Lewis smiled and leaned forward so he could kiss her back.

"Okay."

Cleo unzipped the tent and crawled out into the warm sand and early morning sunshine before holding the tent-flap open for Lewis. One he crawled through the two of them made their way over to what was left of last night's campfire. Bella and Will were sitting in the sand nearby, Bella's mouth running a mile a minute, while Emma tidied up the area by picking up any leftover graham cracker and chocolate wrappers.

"Classic Emma." Cleo teased. "Always tidying up."

Emma rolled her eyes playfully. "I don't know about you, but I'd like to not get fined for littering."

"We're on an uninhabited island. I really doubt there are any police lurking around." Lewis pointed out.

"Speaking of uninhabited," Cleo began. "Where'd Rikki and Zane go?"

Emma shrugged. "I thought they were still in the tent with you two." She turned to Bella and Will. "Bella? Do you know where Rikki and Zane went?"

Bella shook her head. "No. Rikki said something about a strange noise really early this morning, though. Maybe she went to investigate."

Cleo and Emma exchanged worried glances.

"I'm sure they're alright." Will said, standing up and brushing the sand from his shorts. "If they're not back here in, say, ten minutes, we'll go looking for them."

"Or we could start looking for them now." Cleo suggested.

"Cleo, chill." Lewis said, nudging her with his elbow. She'd always been quick to panic. "Just give them a few minutes."

Cleo huffed and sat down beside Bella. She fiddled nervously with a small shell that was laying half buried beside her. Lewis helped Emma gather up the rest of the trash and secure it in a couple ziplock baggies. The air felt thick with apprehension now. It made Cleo feel sick to her stomach. Fifteen minutes later, just moments before they were all going to start searching, Rikki and Zane came stumbling out of the woods. They looked rough, their clothes slightly torn and clinging onto burs. Scratches from the island's various fauna were littered across Zane's face and Rikki's left arm.

"There you two are!" Cleo exclaimed, rushing over to them. "Where'd you go?"

"I thought I heard something this morning," Rikki began, pulling a twig from her hair. "It almost sounded like footsteps, except heavier. Bigger. I don't know how to explain it. Anyway, I got up to go check it out and Zane decided to follow me. Long story short, we got a little lost on our way back."

"A little lost?" Zane retorted. "We went in circles for like two hours and got eaten alive by bugs. I'm never going camping again."

Cleo chuckled, relieved. "Always the dramatic one, aren't you Zane?"

"What do you think was making whatever sound you heard?" Lewis asked, looking toward the jungle.

Rikki shrugged. "I've got no idea. Creeped me out, whatever it was."

"It was probably just an animal or something." Will said. "I wouldn't worry too much about it."

"Next time you go investigating, try and tell one of us first." Cleo scalded worriedly. "I thought you'd been kidnapped or something! Again!"

"Again?" Emma asked worriedly. "What do you mean again?"

"A few months ago some idiot tried to use counterfeit money at the café." Will began, turning his attention to Emma. "They tied Rikki up and tried to hold her hostage when she confronted them about it. We got her out of there though. €"and blew up their boat. It was pretty badass."

"Wow." Emma breathed. "They didn't hurt you or anything, did they?"

Rikki shook her head. "Nah. My phone was the only casualty."

"That's a relief. I still can't believe everything I've missed. Did anything else happen while I was away?"

"Lewis has a kid now." Zane commented, grabbing an unopened chocolate bar from the cooler they'd left next to their campfire.

Emma put her hands on her hips and quirked an eyebrow, a stance she'd subconsciously adopted from her mother. "Ya' know Zane, your sarcasm was the one thing I didn't miss."

"It isn't sarcasm, I really do have a kid now. She's three weeks old." Lewis said, surprisingly calm. Cleo wasn't sure what she was anticipating, but it certainly wasn't such a steady reply. She was glad Lewis was starting to come to around to fatherhood. The entire first week Elena was home Cleo had found herself talking Lewis out of panic attacks. He seemed much more comfortable around Elena now though, more natural. It'd been almost two weeks since he last called Cleo in the middle of the night panicking.

Emma blinked, the information not quite registering. "You're joking."

"He's really not," Bella added, pulling her phone from her back pocket. "Do you want to see pictures? I took a bunch! Elena is so cute."

"Ughâ€”Sure?"

Cleo could tell Emma didn't know what to say. It looked like she was in a state shock. Which, in retrospect, she probably was. Her mouth was gaping wide as she watched Bella scroll through the album of pictures she'd taken the night Elena was born.

"Didn't I tell you?" Bella chirped. "She's so cute I can barely stand it. Look at her little nose! And her tiny hands!"

"Don't worry Emma," Cleo assured her. "I'll explain everything when we get back the mainland. Which we should probably start heading for, by the way. I've got work in," She looked down at her watch. "Two and a half hours."

"You heard her, boys." Rikki said. "Go, get to taking down the tent! We'll be supervising from the shoreline."

Will, Lewis, and Zane all collectively groaned before turning around and trudging toward the tent.

Rikki grinned smugly and gestured toward the sea. "Now, shall we swim?"

"I'll beat you to the moon pool!" Bella called, sprinting excitedly toward the water. Rikki and Cleo chased after her, leaving Emma to her incredibly jumbled thoughts.

She couldn't believe Lewis had a baby now. A baby. A little person who was half him, half someone else. Just who and where was this kid's mother? Weren't him and Cleo still together? His daughterâ€”Elena, Bella had called herâ€”must've been a big part in that complicated situation he was alluding to last night. And why did Bella know about the moon pool? Emma was under the impression that was her and Cleo and Rikki's special place. Did Bella transform there too? Is that why she knew about it? Emma had so many questions and hadn't the slightest idea who to ask or where to start. She was loathe to even consider it, but perhaps Rikki and Cleo really had replaced her. She knew it wasn't an intentional replacement, Cleo and Rikki were too good-hearted for that, but it was a replacement all the same.

Feeling like a third wheel, Emma decided to help the boys pack up instead of joining Cleo and Bella and Rikki in their swim.

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"You not feel like going for a swim?"

Will's voice pulled Emma from her rampant thoughts. She turned to look at him, faux smile in place and ziplock baggie of trash clutched in her left hand.

"I've need to get all this trash cleaned up first." She lied, bending over to pick up another chocolate bar wrapper. "If you can't tell already, I'm a little on the obsessive compulsive side."

Will chuckled as he helped her gather up what little trash remained in their campsite; a few water bottles, a couple beer cans here and there, graham crack and chocolate bar wrappers. "You're not the only one. When it comes to my tools and dive gear I can get pretty OCD myself."

"So, you're Will right?" Emma inquired. "Bella's boyfriend?"

"That I am." He said, grinning as though the very mention of Bella's name brightened his day. His smile was warm and incredibly infectious. Emma couldn't help but grin along with him. "And you're Emma? Cleo and Rikki's friend?"

"That's me."

"Well, it's nice to officially meet you then. I wanted to talk to you some last night but Cleo didn't really let any of us get a word in edgewise. She was pretty excited."

"Cleo has always been excitable. I've known her and Lewis since I was eight, and I've unfortunately known Zane since I was five."

"Since you were five? Jesus, I'm sorry."

"I heard that, fishboy!" Zane called from within the tent him and Lewis were attempting to dismantle. "I am a freakin' gift!"

"Be nice, Zane!" Emma chastised, standing up from where she was squatted down, collecting trash. "Don't make me come over there!"

Will snorted. "Yeah, he doesn't like me much."

"I think he does, it just takes Zane a long time to warm up to people. He's got too much pride for his own good, and his father? Harrison? Well, let's just say he's a real piece of work. I'm sure Zane will come around eventually though."

"I'm not too worried about it." Will shrugged. "Rikki seems happy enough with him, so I guess he can't too bad."

Before Emma could formulate a response she heard Cleo's voice from behind her. She turned around to see her two friends (three friends? Could Bella be considered her friend now?), propped up on their elbows in the water, gesturing toward her.

"Are you not coming swimming?" Cleo asked.

Emma held up her ziplock baggie of trash. "Not until I finish picking up the campsite!"

Rikki laughed and nudged Bella. "I told you so."

"D'you need any help? Bella offered.

"Nah, we're almost done! I think Lewis and Zane are almost done with the tent too."

"Zane is putting it in the boat as we speak." Lewis said as he approached Emma and Will. "Now let's agree to never use the tent sleeper again."

"Are you ready to go now? I do have work today!" Cleo called.

"You go ahead Emma," Lewis said. "We'll meet you back at the mainland."

Emma nodded and, without an excuse not to, joined Cleo and Rikki and Bella on their swim back. As she ran into the surf she heard Zane starting up the boat and Will saying something she couldn't quite catch to Lewis. The rumble of the boat's engine faded out of earshot as Emma submerged beneath the waves.

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Once they all met back up at Rikki's Café, the girls decided to head to the Sertori's so Cleo could get changed for work and Lewis could pick up Elena.

When they arrived Cleo rushed up the stairs with a be right back! while Rikki flopped down on the couch next to Sam, who was holding a sleeping Elena. Cleo wasn't thrilled about Laurie asking her to come in early to work, but the marine park's new seal exhibit was opening today and apparently there were people already lined up outside the park gates. When Laurie called the night before he said he'd probably need the help that afternoon and Cleo couldn't find it in herself to say no.

Meanwhile, downstairs, Rikki was leaned over Sam's shoulder and looking at Elena. "How'd the little munchkin do?"

"Wonderfully." Sam said before reluctantly standing up and handing Elena back to Lewis's eagerly waiting arms. "Just like I knew she would. So Lewis, how was your first baby free night?"

"Long." He replied, pressing a kiss to Elena's forehead. "I missed my little dove."

"So," Emma said, taking a few curious steps toward Lewis. "This is her?"

He nodded. "This is her."

Emma swallowed, mouth suddenly very dry. "Elena, is it?"

"Yeah. Elena Allison."

"Wow." She said, at a loss for words.

"I'm sorry," Sam said, noting Emma's presence. "I don't think we've met before. I'm Sam. Are you a friend of Cleo's?"

Emma smiled at Sam and nodded. "I'm Emma. Me, Cleo, Rikki, and Lewis have actually been friends since we were, what, six years old? My parents and I have been traveling for the last year though, I just

got back."

"Well, then it's great to finally meet you."

"Okay, I'm back!" Came Cleo's voice, followed by the sound of her heavy footsteps coming down the stairs. She pulled her hair back in a ponytail as she joined her friends and Sam in the living room. "And I've got an hour before I need to leave."

"Does that mean we can go get something to eat?" Rikki asked from her spot on the couch. "It's almost eleven and I haven't had breakfast yet, I think I might starve to death."

"Yeah yeah," Cleo said with a laugh. "C'mon, now that I've changed we can head back to the cafÃ©. We'll grab something there."

The walk to the cafÃ© was uneventful, filled with excited chatter about the new seal exhibit and their Eclipse Night Safety Plans, but when they walked through the cafÃ© door it was evident something was wrong. Zane briskly approached the girls, but his attention was turned toward Lewis.

"Just a heads up," He said quickly. "Claire is here. You've probably got fifteen seconds before she suddenly appears like the black hearted Hell Bitch she is."

"Oh shit," Lewis groaned. "Did she say what she wanted?"

"Just that she wanted to talk to you."

"Fantastic." Lewis muttered, and just about that time Claire breezed up behind Zane, arms folded across her chest.

"I heard that Hell Bitch comment, asshole." She growled at him, eyes narrowed. "Don't you have a motorbike to wreck?"

"What do you want, Claire?" Lewis asked, shifting Elena's carrier to his other arm.

"We need to talk."

"About what? Our daughter, maybe?" Next to Lewis, Cleo seemed to flinch at the phrase. "Or the fact you want to abandon her?"

Claire barked a humorless laugh at him. "Oh! Like you have room to talk about abandoning! At least Iâ€”you know what? No. I'm not getting into this with you out here, Lewis. We can talk in Zane's office."

Lewis looked over at Zane, hoping he'd say something along the lines of \_oh no you can't\_, but Zane just shrugged and gestured toward his office. He was obviously just as intimidated by Claire as everyone else, although Lewis couldn't blame him. Even on her good days Claire was a force to be reckoned with. She hadn't always been so cut-throat though. Or, at least, Lewis didn't think so. At the bar, the night they met, she'd been flirtatious and eccentric and clever, and the morning after they laid in bed until two o'clock laughing between their filthy kisses and twisting in the sheets. "—but once she was thrown back into Lewis's life, seven months later and six months pregnant, she seemed like a completely different person, and Claire



\_had been\_ that person ever since; hostile and aggravated and hormonal.

A lot of it had to do with the fact she wanted nothing to do with their child, and when Lewis asked why she didn't just terminate the pregnancy she said she'd tried, but it turned out she was too far along to legally do so. Pregnancy didn't suit Claire well. At all. She'd panicked almost daily, even when it was something as simple as a kick or roll that was occurring. Claire mentioned once, while Lewis was holding her hair in between vomiting spells, that morning sickness wasn't what was bothering her, it was the idea of something growing inside of her that made her sick with fear. It was one of those incredibly rare moments where she allowed herself to be vulnerable again, to be the girl she was back at the bar. Claire must've been more frightened than she originally let on, and Lewis guessed she was still dealing with the trauma of living through a phobia for nine months on some level, along with some very obvious postpartum depression.

Lewis looked over at Cleo. "You go ahead to work, Cleo. I'll meet you guys when Claire and I are done."

"Want me to take Elena?" Bella asked gently.

"No, that's alright. We won't be long."

Cleo nodded and, with her friends, left the café with her heart feeling twice as heavy. So much for her great day.

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><p><strong>an:\*\* apologies in advance for this rather boring chapter, the first few of a story usually are - especially when new characters are getting aquatinted. but! just hang in there; the eclipse is coming up very very soon and it's going to mess with our mermaids' magic big time, bella's secret is also going to start causing problems (in the next chapter actually, and no, she's not pregnant if that's what you're thinking lmfao). i'm going to be bringing back two very familiar faces soon as well. anyway, i hope you all enjoyed! next update is a 15 reviews. also, special thanks to Fandom4Life16 for their in-depth review! i really appreciated it, doll. :) ps: there is going to be some zikki bonding in the next chapter, weeee~ x

#### 4. A Lifetime In Ten Seconds

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Lewis's words to Claire were still echoing through Cleo's mind.

\_About what? Our daughter, maybe?\_

\_Our daughter, \_those were the words, the sudden dose of reality, that cut her to the very core. Elena had felt like solely Lewis's daughter for the past three and a half weeks, something Cleo was slowly but surely starting to come to terms with, but the scene with Claire at the café was a painful reminder that Elena had a mother tooâ€"-well, if you could consider someone like Claire a mother. Cleo

had a hard time seeing her as anyone else other than the strange and bad tempered woman her boyfriend had sex with while they were fighting.

"Down Iski," Cleo sighed, gently pushing the seal pup away as he tried to crawl back into her lap. "No."

She wanted so badly to be excited for today, for the two little seal pups' new lease on life, but now all Cleo felt like doing was crawling into bed and sleeping for the next twenty years. Why was Claire still on the Gold Coast, anyway? She should've been well on her way back to Perth by now. Cleo had a bad feeling. It was a stupid and irrational fear, she knew, but Cleo couldn't help but feel as though she were losing Lewis. Again. What if Claire turned out to be like Charlotte, minus the mermaid powers? Cleo didn't even realize she was having a panic attack until Laurie's voice brought her out of her paranoid thoughts.

"Hey! Cleo, what's wrong?" He asked, squatting down beside her. "Calm down. Just breathe."

She nodded and took a few deep breaths, slowly becoming away of the warm tears streaking down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," Cleo apologized, shrugging self-consciously. "I don't know what's wrong with me today."

Laurie gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "You need a few minutes?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm alright. How much longer until the show starts?"

"Ten minutes." He replied.

Cleo forced herself to smile. "I'll be ready."

"Good," He said, smiling right back at her. "I'll go out and make a little intro speech while you get things set up for the show. Iski and Doko's trainer should be here any minute to take over. He's still getting things unloaded from the back of the truck."

With that Laurie headed off to begin his introduction speech and welcome the afternoon crowd, of which Rikki and Bella and Emma should be apart of. Cleo hoped seeing their faces in the audience, especially Emma's, would lift her spirits.

"You ready for your debut appearance, guys?" She asked the little seals.

Doko barked cutely at her and a tiny though genuine smile graced her lips. If Cleo couldn't be happy for herself, then she was at least going to be happy for the two little once slaughter-bound seals who now had a brand new lease on life. She stood up, stretched her smile into a dazzling grin, and went to join Laurie out in front of the crowd.

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"I don't know how to explain it, okay? I don't like her, I really

don't. She's a little fucking parasite, but at the same timeâ€¦" Claire trailed off, unsure how to clearly explain the war that was raging inside her. "I can't make myself leave her. I don't get it. I really fucking don't. She caused me nothing but pain and discomfort and misery for nine goddamn months, not to mention God knows how many hours of excruciatingly painful labor, but I just can't fucking leave. I've tried, Lewis. I have tried so many times in the last three weeks to just throw my shit together and leave but I can't because I keep thinking of her and it's making me so fucking mad I literally can't function."

"It's called maternal instinct." Lewis calmly said from his spot on the loveseat Zane kept adjacent to his desk. "You don't hate Elena. You want to because you never wanted a baby and you never wanted an excuse to be tied down, but you don't hate her. You're just afraid to let yourself love her so you're taking it out on everyone around you."

"I'm not afraid of anything!" Claire hissed, ceasing her anxious pacing to glare daggers at Lewis. "It's like me and herâ€¦"

"Her name is Elena."

"It's like me and Elena," She annunciated. "Have thisâ€¦ invisible cord connecting us together. I can't get away. Whenever I try to I just start thinking of her, and I start missing her. How is that even possible?! I literally popped her out and handed her to you! I want absolutely nothing to do with her and yetâ€¦ Ugh. I didn't fucking ask for this."

"And you think I did?!" Lewis asked incredulously, narrowing his eyes. "No, of course I didn't! But you know what? I'm making the best of it. Are you even listening to yourself, Claire? Jesus, you just called a three week old baby, our daughter, a parasite. You can act like a heartless bitch all you want but you're not going to fool me, we both know the truth. You're scared shitless. And you know what? There's nothing wrong with that. There is nothing wrong with being afraid. I'm eighteen, you're eighteenâ€¦-we're not parents! We have every right to be scared shitless, but Claire? You've got to get yourself together. If you want to be in Elena's life? Fine, I won't keep you from her, but your attitude has got to change. This," He gestured toward her. "This is not the Claire I met nine months ago. This," He gestured toward her again. "Is just the wall she's put up to protect herself. We both know you're a better person than this."

Claire exhaled a shaky breath, on the verge of tears. "I don't know what I want. I just don't know."

Lewis stood up and laid Elena back in her carrier before walking toward the door. "Take a few days to think about what you want, okay? I'm not standing in your way, but my advice? Go with your gut. Your instincts are never wrong about these things. And another thing? See a psychiatrist. They can really help with the postpartum depression." He stood in the doorway of Zane's office, looking back at Claire. "We can't enemies Claire, for Elena's sake."

She looked away from where she'd been staring at the floor to meet his gaze. "We can't be friends either."

"Okay." Lewis said with a nod. He left without another word.

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Emma couldn't get over how incredibly rude Claire was. What would possess someone to act like that? Even on her worst days, Emma never felt the urge to lash so hostilely at those around her. She was actually dumbfounded by the malice in Claire's voice when she growled \_don't you have a motorbike to wreck? \_at Zane, and even more confusing? Rikki didn't say a word, which was extremely out of character. for She was almost always the first to jump to her friends' (and boyfriend's) defense. Although, on second thought, maybe this wasn't Rikki's, not to mention Cleo and Bella's, first altercation with Claire. Maybe Rikki just didn't think picking fights with Claire was worth her time anymore. Cleo had mentioned something earlier about Claire moving back to Perth within the next week or so. They must all be begrudgingly dealing with her until she left for good, Emma figured. It certainly made sense.

"Cleo told you Claire was a storm with skin." Rikki said around a mouthful of pretzel in reply to Emma's aloud thinking. "You should've listened."

"She was just so," Emma began, raking her brain for a word. "I don't know. I can't think of anything. She was literally so awful I can't think of word to describe her. What was Lewis thinking?"

"He wasn't thinking, that was the problem. Hopefully Claire will be back in Perth by this time next week. The next time she decides to try and go all Queen Bee on us? I'm pretty sure I'm going to punch her in the face." Rikki nudged Bella with her elbow. "What do you think, Bella? Should I rearrange Claire's face with my fist?"

There's no warning. One minute Emma and Rikki were talking about Claire and her horrendous behavior while on their way to see Cleo and the new seal exhibit, and the next Bella was hitting the ground with a \_thud.\_

"Bella?!" Emma and Rikki worriedly called out in unison.

Bella suddenly laid unconscious at their feet, a small crowd slowly gathering around.

"I'll go get help." Rikki said quickly, and before Emma had time to protest that, no, she'd go get help instead, Bella began to violently seize.

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They weren't there.

Emma, Bella, and Rikkiâ€”They were supposed to be in the front row of the audience and \_they\_ \_weren't there\_.

Cleo was having trouble keeping the fake smile plastered on her face as she rewarded Iski and Doko with fish treats. She couldn't believe it. She just couldn't believe they weren't there. Where on earth would Emma, Bella, and Rikki even be if not in the audience?

Certainly the three of them still weren't getting pretzels. They'd went to do that almost a half an hour ago. Cleo caught her bottom lip between her teeth and bit down hard in an attempt to distract herself from the tears threatening to flow free again. She felt incredibly abandoned. Lewis wasn't there, he was too busy talking to the mother of \_his child\_, and now her three best friends were gone too.

Were they okay? Or did they just get bored and decide to leave before the show even began? Cleo's panicked mind reeled with a thousand different possibilities.

Bella had seemed so genuinely excited about the exhibit yesterday, even Rikki had acted like she wanted to come. Something must've happened, Cleo soon decided. It just wasn't like them to bail. Especially Emma. Emma liked to have a plan and schedule for everything.

Lost in her thoughts, Cleo didn't realize Iski smacking the bright orange ball toward her with his tail until it splashed just inches away from her, soaking her to the bone in front of the entire stadium.

\_Ten seconds\_, Her mind supplied, \_You've only got ten seconds.\_

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><p><strong>an:\*\* oh wow, thank you guys so much for all the lovely reviews! i really didn't expect this to get any, especially considering how boring the start has been haha. i hope you enjoyed this chapter. :) i know i promised zikki but i ended up rewriting the chapter like three times and the zikki got pushed to the chapter after this one. sorry! it's coming though, don't you little darlings worry. i'm also sorry about the rather short length, next chapter will be longer. promise! i've not been very inspired these past couple of days and it's been kind of hard to crank the words out, heh. now, coming up next: what's cleo going to do? is her secret going to be discovered? and if so, by who? is bella alright? what happened to her? what's going on in claire's head? and what's sophie going to get up to next chapter? oh, and the eclipse is just two days away. stay tuned! next update at 21 reviews. oh and ps: the first two chapters might be renamed soon, just a heads up. x

## 5. Playing The Waiting Game

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The inside of the hospital felt frigidly cold, a sharp contrast to the sweltering day outside.

Rikki was sitting next to Emma in one of the waiting room's overly plush chairs and had Zane's leather jacket draped over her shoulders, more so for the comfort of its familiarity than the warmth it provided. She gnawed nervously on her bottom lip, her anxiety and concern growing rapidly by the second. It'd only been twenty minutes since they'd arrived with Bella in the back of the ambulance, but to Rikki it felt like they'd been waiting a thousand lifetimes. She kept replaying the events that occurred at the marine park in her head, wondering if there was something different she could've done to assure Bella's safety. Over and over again Rikki saw Bella limply

hitting the ground. Over and over again she heard the resounding\_ thud\_ that resulted from Bella's head hitting the asphalt—the bright spray of blood that came along with it was still burnt behind her eyelids.

Rikki watched Zane pace the other side of the room impatiently, desperate to find cellphone reception. He'd only been able to stay on the phone with Lewis long enough to tell him he needed to come to the hospital before the call dropped. Rikki could tell Zane was getting more frustrated by the minute. She hoped he didn't fling his phone across the room in a fit of anger. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Rikki?" Emma asked, bringing her back to reality. "You okay?"

"It's not me you should be worried about." She replied a little too aggressively for her own liking. "What are they doing in there? Why don't we know anything?"

"It's only been twenty minutes, Rikki. I'm sure they're doing everything they can." Emma said, trying to be as reassuring as she possibly could.

The panic started to well back up in Rikki's throat. She forced it back down. "And what if they're not, Emma?"

"They are, you don't spend ten years in medical school for a job you're only going to do halfheartedly."

Rikki remained silent until Zane rejoined her and Emma a few minutes later. She could feel the tension he was harboring as he fidgeted in his seat, unable to keep still. A heavy silence fell over the three of them. No one knew quite what to say. Uncomfortable and eager for a distraction, Rikki texted Will again.

It was Emma who broke the quiet. "What'd Lewis say?"

"He's on his way." Zane replied. "I couldn't get much else, though. The reception in here is fucking horrid. It sounded like we were both talking in a wind tunnel."

She nodded, then mused aloud. "I wonder how things with him and Claire went."

"Not good, I'd say. I'm just glad she isn't pregnant anymore, because seriously? The last two months I have literally had to \_hide in my office\_ whenever she'd come to the cafÃ©. I couldn't handle her. I really couldn't. I didn't think it was possible to meet someone worse than Sophie, but Claire takes the cake. At least Sophie isn't aggressive and bipolar."

"No," Rikki added. "I still think Sophie is worse."

"You just don't like her because she hits on me twenty four seven." He said, lips quirking up into a tiny grin.

Rikki good-naturedly elbowed him in the ribs. "Wipe that smug look off your face. You're not as irresistible as you think you are."

"I don't know, I \_am\_ \_pretty\_ irresistible. C'mon, who could resist

this pretty face?"

Her and Zane continued to bicker playfully back and forth for the next fifteen or so minutes. It was a pleasant little distraction from the dreary situation they were all still awaiting the outcome of. Zane had a habit of doing that, distracting Rikki from whatever bed was looming in her life. Sometimes she really hated just how much she'd come to lean on him, and other times, like now, she couldn't have been more grateful for him and his stupid pretty face. She couldn't help but wonder, is this what love felt like?

Rikki didn't even realize Lewis had arrived until she heard Zane saying "C'mon, fork her over." He was reaching for Elena, who Lewis hadn't even fully gotten out of the carrier. Her and Emma both looked at Zane with a quirked eyebrow.

"What?" He asked innocently. "I'm the cool uncle."

"Zane, if you corrupt my child," Lewis began. "I will \_end \_you."

"It's my job." He looked down at Elena, who he now had cradled against his chest. "Isn't that right? If we don't give daddy chest pain we're obviously doing something wrong."

Lewis then looked past Zane and Elena toward Rikki and Emma, concerned. "What happened?"

"Bella has a seizure at the marine park." Emma answered. "The doctors haven't told us anything yet though."

"A seizure?" Lewis asked, surprised. "Just out of the blue?"

Rikki shrugged. "I don't get it either."

"Were you near any flashing lights or loud music or anything? If she has any underlying seizure disorder that could've triggered her."

Emma shook her head. "No. We were on our way to meet Cleoâ€"- She paused. "Oh crap, Cleo! She probably thinks we ditched her. She has no idea what's going on!"

"I'll call her." Lewis volunteered. "If she doesn't pick up I'll leave a message."

"You might want to go step out in the hallway," Zane said. "The reception in here is terrible."

Rikki worriedly watched as Lewis nodded and walked briskly away. Given how she reacted when Bella nearly turned into water on the night of their full moon together, Rikki didn't think Cleo would take the news well.

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The only option Cleo had was to hide in plain sight.

She didn't have to time to think, all she had time to do was sprint into Doko and Iski's enclosure and throw herself in their pool before

her legs were exchanged her tail. For a brief moment Cleo was relieved she hadn't exposed herself to the world, but that relief was short lived. Laurie would be come looking for her soon, she realized. Probably as soon as the seals' duet show was over. If Laurie, or anybody, came into Iski and Doko's enclosure Cleo knew she'd be caught. The seals' private pool was much shallower than the large aquarium tank they'd be spending most of their time in after todayâ€”and five feet of crystal clear water definitely couldn't hide a mermaid.

With a wildly racing heart Cleo turned her head and saw that the door that connected the Doko and Iski's aquarium tank to their private tank was wide open. She knew she had no other choice but to swim through into the aquarium when the coast was clear. She peaked her head through the gate and peered through the glass. It was almost empty, save for three or four bypassers. Everyone must've still been watching Iski and Doko's debut show.

It was a risky move but, again, it was the only choice she had. The moment everyone had their heads briefly turned Cleo quickly sped across the tank, leaving nothing but a faint trail of bubbles in her wake. She made a b-line for the little cave the seals' were given for privacy. It was a tight fit but Cleo managed to squeeze herself in. For the moment she was safe, but Cleo knew she couldn't hide there forever. She peeked her head out and saw the few people that had passing through were gone, but she'd been working at the marine park long enough to know the aquarium never stayed empty long. In fact, the only time she'd ever really seen it this empty was during showsâ€”which reminded Cleo that the show was going to be over very soon and Doko and Iski would soon be released into their larger tank, and then the house would be packed and she'd without a doubt be exposed.

Cleo's lip trembled as she debated her options. She could stay in her little cave and hope for the best or she could swim like a bat out of hell back into Doko and Iski's enclosure, pull herself out of the water, and pray no one walked in on her waiting to dry off. It wasn't a hard choice to make. Adrenaline swept through Cleo's veins like wildfire as she quickly swam back through the little connecting gate and back into the shallow pool. She took a deep breath before hauling herself out of the water. With a shaking hand Cleo used her power to pull as much water as she could off of herself and ten, eleven, twelve seconds later Cleo had her legs back.

She nearly cried with relief.

It wasn't even a full minute later Cleo heard Laurie's footsteps echoing. Without another excuse in mind, she decided to fake a panic attack. It'd make sense given the very real one she'd had this morning thinking about Lewis. Unsurprisingly, Laurie takes the bait.

"Hey hey, calm down Cleo!" He tried gently reassure. He squatted down next to her again and gently rubbed her back. "What is going on with you today?"

Cleo didn't blink, she instead kept her eyes to open just long enough to spring tears to her eyes. Go big or go home, she figured.

"I've just had a really really bad week." Cleo began. "I'm sorry



Laurie. Really. I'm just feelingâ€¦ really overwhelmed right now."

â€”well, that part wasn't a lie.

Laurie sighed. "You know what, Cleo? I think you should go home. Just take the rest of the day off, okay? I can't having you running off in the middle of shows and freaking out in front of everyone."

Cleo's heart dropped into her stomach. Go home? It wasn't so much the request that bothered her, but the disappointment in Laurie's voice.

"No no," She protested. "I'm fine now, I can work."

"I'm not asking, Cleo. I'm telling. Go home."

Cleo nodded solemnly and got to her feet. She didn't bother looking back or waving goodbye at Laurie as she left to collect her clothes and phone from her work locker.

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"Oh God," Zane said suddenly, going rigid. In his arms Elena began to squirm and fuss. "Oh God, oh God. It's crying it's crying Rikki help me holy shit what do I do oh my God I think I broke her."

Emma rolled her eyes. Men.

"Give me that poor baby." She said as she got up to take Elena, noting the panicked look on both Zane and Rikki's faces. "And you didn't break her, Zane. She's a baby. Babies cry."

It was the first time she'd really got see Elena up close and personal. She had quite the resemblance to Lewis already, but her eyes, they were a strikingly beautiful green that reminded Emma so strongly of the Claire she'd seen back at the cafÃ© it made her heart leap. Claire's eyes could've been iron swords, sharp and flashing and hiding lethality. Emma really hoped Elena didn't take after her mother in any other way. If she didâ€¦ Well, Lewis would certainly have his hands full.

"Ssh," Emma smoothed, bouncing Elena gently. "It's okay."

Elena continued to fuss.

"Zane?" Emma asked. "Could you hand me Elena's diaper bag? I think she's needs her diaper changed."

Zane nodded and slid Elena's diaper bag over Emma's shoulder.

"If Lewis comes back tell him I'm changing her in the bathroom and no, she hasn't been kidnapped."

Leaving Rikki and Zane to themselves, Emma exited the waiting room and stepped out into the hallway. She was pretty positive the bathroom was to the right and down a flight of stairs, although since she had Elena in her arms Emma decided she'd take the elevator instead.

"Hey," Emma said as she approached Lewis, who was still standing just outside the waiting room and trying to get ahold of Cleo. "I'm going to go change Elena. Did you get ahold of Cleo yet?"

Lewis shook his head. "Not yet. She doesn't get off for another hour but I thought maybe she'd be on break. I left her a message, and texted her. Any news on Bella yet?"

"No." Emma replied. "I don't know how much longer I can wait. I hope she's alright."

"She will be." He said. "Bella's stubborn as all hell. She'll pull through this."

Just as Emma was about to bid farewell to Lewis and go get a still fussing Elena's diaper changed, the EMT that treated Bella in the back of the ambulance came walking briskly from the other end of the hallway—the end where they'd taken Bella. She continued to bounce Elena gently as she looked back at Lewis.

"He was on the ambulance with us," She said, nodding toward the dark haired man. "He's probably got some information on Bella. You go see what's going on and I'll get Elena changed."

"Are you sure? I can take her."

Emma nodded. "Yeah, just see how Bella is doing."

Lewis nodded, gave Elena's forehead a kiss, and hurried into the waiting room for the update on Bella's condition. At least, they both hoped the EMT could update them on Bella's condition. He did treat her in the back of the ambulance, after all. Emma's heart was lodged in her throat the entire walk to the bathroom.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>an:\*\* almost thirty reviews! thank you darlings so much, omg. i'm trying really hard here, especially since i don't ship cleo and lewis like&#128| at all, haha. i wanted to write a present for my darling mimmie though so ssssh. next chapter: the eclipse is coming! hopefully bella is home in time. will and sophie will also be in the next chapter (this was another rewrite where she and him, like zikki in the last chapter, got pushed ahead). hope you're all enjoying! there is also mermaid drama and claire drama brewing. i've got lots of goodies planned. :) now, i'm off to update \_achromatic \_because i'm having lewis/rikki withdrawal. next update at around 35 reviews (can you please go vote on my poll real quick too? you don't have to but i'd love you forever). oh, and i'm still working on changing the chapter titles, haha. x

## 6. Colors In The Dark

5. á´„á´•ÊŸá´•Ê€s ÉªÉ´ á´>Êœá´‡ á´...á´€Ê€á´<

Bella dreamed.

She dreamed she was floating in the sea, drifting on her back and peering up at the purple twilight sky. Serenity and a warm sense of peace, almost as warm as the seawater she was submerged in, radiated

throughout her being. Bella could've spent an eternity floating there in the warm light of the setting sun, surrounded by an oceanic paradise. She hummed happily and let her beautiful voice fill the quiet evening, let it intertwine with the sound of rolling waves and cawing seagulls. This is where she belonged, she knew. In the sea. Just her and the ocean.

\_Bella\_, Came a sudden whisper.\_ Bella Bella Bella\_.

Bella knitted her eyebrows together, confused. The strange, foreign, and very masculine voice seemed to come from within her own head. The whisper grew into whispers, and those whispers grew quickly in both volume and number. \_Bella Bella Bella Bella!\_

Her sense of serenity and calm drained rapidly from her veins and panic seized her heart. She tried to look around but found she couldn't move her head. She couldn't move any part of her body. She was immobilized. Out of the corner of her eye, Bella could see the crystalline seawater slowly but surely filling with darkness. It looked like oil or tar, thick and black and insidious. She fought hard against her body, wanting to escape the mass of blackness encroaching toward her from every angle, but she was paralyzed.

Crippling fear intermingled with the panic Bella was already feeling, sending her heart into overdrive. The darkness was touching her now, slowly snaking up over her fin and fingers. It burned her skin. Seconds passed like hours as the darkness began to pull Bella under—there was no seawater now, just an ocean of blackness. Hot, glutinous blackness. The sky, however, remained a beautiful watercolor purple streaked in varying hues of red and blue.

Right before the darkness sucked her under and swallowed her whole, Bella found a star.

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"—thought the doctor said she'd be waking up soon."

Pain.

"She will. Just—| give her some more time. She did hit her head pretty hard."

\_Throb. Throb. Throb\_.

"More time? It's been, what, four and half hours?! We've given her enough time! She should be

awake by now!"

Pain.

"Calm down, Cleo."

Her head hurt, that was the only conscious thought Bella Hartley could process. There was an absolutely blinding pain radiating from the back of her skull to front of her eyes. She felt groggy and half-awake and confused. When had she fallen asleep? Wasn't she just at the marine park with Emma and Rikki? And why did her head hurt so

badly? Bella willed herself to open her eyes but, once again, found herself unable to do so. She was paralyzed.

Bella was hearing voices again as well, although this time they weren't the malicious whispers she'd been plagued with earlier. Instead, they were the familiar and comforting voices of Cleo and Emma. Unfortunately they sounded muffled and far away, which only added to Bella's confusion.

"Hey, I think she's waking up. Bella? Can you hear me?"

Lewis. That was Lewis's voice. \_ Yes\_, She wanted to say. \_I can hear you. Why are you asking me if I can hear you?\_

\_ "Give me a sign,"\_ He continued, something like desperation leaking into his tone.\_ Bella could also faintly hear Elena's sweet little babbles. "\_ Wiggle your fingers, your toes. Do something for us. Anything."\_

Still incredibly confused and becoming more so by the minute, Bella tried to do as Lewis asked and wiggle her fingers. She couldn't.

"I don't think she can hear you." Sophie said very matter-of-factly. Sophie? What was Sophie doing here? Shouldn't she be watching the café?

A hand enveloped her limp one and a mouth pressed a gentle kiss to her knuckles. Will. That had to be Will. "Bella! Please wake up, baby. For me?"

-â€"Bella squeezed his hand. She had absolutely no idea how she managed to do so, especially considering she still couldn't move her left hand, but she'd done it and that gentle little squeeze of Will's fingers was a start. The strange burning sensation the dark substance from her dream brought on (which was actually just a mild allergic reaction to the medication in her IVs) was slowly starting to fade, seemingly working its way out of her system.

"Bella?!" Will asked hopefully. "Bella, squeeze my hand again!"

She did, tighter this time. Stronger.

"C'mon Bella, open your eyes." He pleaded. "I know you can hear me now. Wake up."

Bella's eyes fluttered tiredly open. She still felt groggy, as though she'd just awoken from a long sleep. At least four sighs of relief echoed throughout the room, but she was still incredibly confused. Everything was still black. She still couldn't see.

"Bella, oh thank God!" Cleo called, and suddenly Bella felt her friend's arms wrapping gently around her neck. "I'm so glad you're alright. How're you feeling?"

"Cleo?" She asked. "Where am we? Why is it dark? Why does my head hurt?"

"We're at the hospital, you had a bad seizure at the marine park." Emma began, placing a delicate hand on Bella's wrist. Bella's heart plummeted into her stomach, they didn't know her secret did they?

She'd been working so hard to keep her disease from them all. Especially Will. She really didn't want anyone worrying about her and treating her like glass. Once her and her parents found the right medication she'd be fine. Finding that medication, however, was a lengthy trail and error process. One Bella was incredibly sick of. "You hit your head pretty hard when you fell too, you needed twelve stitches. That's probably why your head is hurting."

"Buy why is it so dark in here?" Bella asked worriedly, fear beginning to stir low in her gut. It made her nauseous. "Why can't I see?"

Unbeknownst to Bella, everyone exchanged worried glances. Will squeezed Bella's hand even tighter and looked over at Sophie. She patted his knee reassuringly, more concerned for him and how Bella's sudden inability to see would effect him and his ability to train than about Bella herself. It was clear to everyone Sophie was only there for Will's sake. The fact Zane was there was probably part of the equation as well. As far as Rikki was concerned, Sophie was just wanted Zane to see her pretending to be a good person.

"You can't see?" Lewis asked, shifting Elena from his left arm to his right.

Bella shook her head. "No, everything is completely black. Isn't there a power outage or something going on?"

Sitting closet to the wall where it was placed, right next to Bella's bed in case she needed it, Lewis hit the emergency call button.

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Blind. Once the word left Dr. Hodgkin's mouth Cleo's mind short-circuited. Blind.

\_Bella was blind. \_

Dr. Hodgkin explained to their rather large group, which now consisted of Cleo, Rikki, Emma, Will, Zane, Sophie, Bella's mum Angela, her father Markus, and her little sister Annemarie, that Bella's sudden blindness was probably caused by the hard blow her head had taken when she fell and that is was most likely temporary. There wasn't anything they could do though, he'd said. They'd just have to wait it out and pray her sight came back. It could take days, weeks, months, even yearsâ€| and that's if it came back at all. Bella was sobbing hysterical into her mother's chest. Angela was sitting next to her frightened daughter, holding her and gently stroking her hair.

"What am I g-going to do?" She wailed. "I'll never see the ocean again! I won't be able to go swimming with my friends anymore!" She conveniently left out the fact she was a mermaid whenever she told her parents her and her friends were going swimming. "I'll never see my wedding day or my kids' faces! I'll never read another book or see another sunset or another audience or-or-orâ€"-"

"Ssssh baby," Angela soothed, gently rubbing Bella's arm. "It's okay. You heard Dr. Hodgkins, it's almost certainly temporary. Your sight will probably come back really soon. You've just got to have faith,

okay?"

"But what if it doesn't?! What if I'm blind forever?!"

"Then we'll hold your hand when we go swimming." Rikki said steadily. "And we'll help you learn brail so you can read again and we'll help you learn whatever else you need. We're not letting you go through this alone, Bella."

"Rikki's right," Cleo agreed. "If this is permanent we're all going to help you make the best of it. We love you."

"I'll hold your hand too!" Six year old Annemarie piped from Markus's lap. She looked a lot like Bella, with big blue eyes and wavy blonde hair. "We can take walks together and I'll tell you what the sunset looks like!"

Bella laughed tearfully into her mother's chest. "I love you guys."

When Dr. Hodgkins said he was going to get Bella's release papers in order, she felt a little less afraid.

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"I don't know what to do, bub." Claire lamented as she anxiously paced her hotel room. She cast a look over at her carelessly unmade bed, it made her think of the way Lewis accidentally kicked (and totally shattered) the very nice lamp off one of the nightstands in the hotel they'd spent a night and a half in.

( \_"Oh my God! You're so paying for that!" She'd laughed. \_

\_Lewis laughed too. "It isn't my fault it was in my way. It obviously wasn't a very intelligent lamp. It deserved to die. It's natural selection."\_

\_"You are so fucking wasted, holy shit." \_

\_"Says the woman who got stuck in her shirt and fell in the bathtub." \_)

"I want us to all get along for Elena's sake, ya' know? Especially me and his girlfriend, butâ€¦ I just don't think that's possible. I mean, should I get her some \_sorry I fucked your boyfriend \_flowers? A \_sorry I've been such a cunt but I don't deal with trauma and phobias very well \_card? You know I don't have any goddamn people skills." Claire groaned dramatically. "She seems like the really quiet and sensitive type too, so I probably majorly offended her and her friends. \_Uuugh. \_I screwed up big time, didn't I?"

On the other end of the line, her brother sighed. "Listen Clairebear, you just need to take things one step at a time right now, okay? First of all, you need to take care of yourself. You need to make sure you're alright with Elena and whats-his-face first, make sure you can look at them and interact with them without feeling uncomfortable or getting a flashback or panic attack or anything vaguely in that family, understand? \_Then\_ you can move on to his girlfriend and her friends. I think it's great that you want to make amends and stay in Elena's life, but you can't just jump into this

headfirst and rush through it. Have you thought about talking to someone?"

\_About being pregnant, \_went left unsaid.

"Sort of." She said with a shrug. "I hate talking to shrinks though, they're such pretentious pricks."

"I know, Sis. Do it for Elena though, okay? And for me. I'm going to be on the Gold Coast in two days and I want to meet my niece."

Despite herself, Claire smiled. "Okay, okay. I'll look into it."

"I gotta' go, Clairebear. I'm going to give my girlfriend a quick call before it gets too late. Love you."

"Love you too Ash, I'll see you in a couple days."

"You know it."

Ash hung up and Claire flopped down on her bed, exhausted. It was getting late, around nine o' clock or so, and she was tempted to just turn in early for the night. It wasn't like she had to wake up early or anything. Claire knew there was no way she'd be able to see Lewis and Elena tomorrow, not without having some sort of breakdown or slipping back into mega-bitch mode. She hated the walls that always seemed to come up around her heart when she was distressed or afraid. Would letting herself love her own daughter be that bad? Would making amends and forging a friendship with the father of her child and those close to him really come back to bite her in the ass?

Sudden vibration from her phone pulled her from her thoughts. It was a text message from Lewis.

\_Be careful, \_It read. \_Eclipse tonight. I'll be over a little later. Me & Zane are getting the black tarps and tape. How is Bella adjusting? \_

Confused, Claire texted back. \_What t\_\_he fuck? \_

Just what the hell could Lewis and pretty boy getting up to this time? Black tarps? Tape? Claire decided she'd probably regret asking.

She got a near instantaneous reply. \_Shit, wrong number. \_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>an:\*\* another short-ish and boring-ish chapter, i'm really sorry! things will get better soon though (and longer), i've still got a couple faces to bring back. ;) but anyway, yes! chapter five. bet you didn't see either of those cliffhangers coming, did you? okay, you probably saw the ash and claire thing since it was in the original story, but the bella being blind thing is new so eheheheua. coming up next chapter: set just an hour or so after ash's phone to claire, we get to see the eclipse shake things up with our mermaids, big time! we'll also get to see how bella is adjusting, how emma is going to react to ash coming home (where he's been will be explained next chapter), and we'll also get some more zikki bonding

(because cuties) and the beginning of a large development between the two of them! ;3 also clewis bonding woo. like i said before, lots of goodies are on the way! you'll just have to muddle through the boring and messy beginning first, haha. next update at around 50 or so reviews, loves. also, pretty please go vote on my poll. :) x

## 7. We Love Our Tragedies

6. á' ; á'† ÊŸá'•á' á'† á'•á'œÊ€ á'>Ê€á'€Éçá'†á'...Éªá'†s

Bella was sitting stiffly on Cleo's couch, her hands trembling lightly where they rested in her lap. Seated next to her, Emma was raking her brain desperately for something comforting to say. Despite the suspicions she held regarding the newest mermaid, Emma still wanted to calm Bella's fears. She wanted to help her somehow find a silver lining in her newfound blindness, but Emma's mind kept drawing a blank. What sliver lining could possibly be found in \_blindness?\_

"I brought you some orange juice." Emma heard Cleo say as she sat down on the other side of Bella.

Bella shrugged at her. "I'm not thirsty."

"Are you sure?" Cleo asked gently.

"Yeah."

Emma gave Cleo a sympathetic look, one which Cleo returned, and sighed quietly.

"Well, we could watchâ€"

Bella was close to tears again, her voice cracking when she spoke. "I can't \_watch\_ anything anymore, Cleo."

"You can't be watching anything right now," Rikki chipped in, tone much softer than Emma was used to. "But you'll be able to soon. Dr. Hodgkins said the blindness the temporary."

"He said it was \_most likely\_ \_temporary\_. I could be blind forever."

Cleo scooted closer to Bella and gave her a tight hug. "I'm sorry, Bella."

A sob tore from Bella's throat as she curled into Cleo's side. "It's so dark. I hate the dark. I'm never going to get to see the light again."

"Sssh," Cleo soothed. "You'll get to see the light again. You've just got to believe your sight is going to come back, okay? Don't doubt it will."

Emma looked down at her lap, heartbroken. She couldn't imagine not being able to see anything but blackness. Bella was the last person who deserved to be robbed of their sight. Although she had a rather unsettling secretiveness to her, she was kind and goodhearted and bubbly and bright. Why did such a tragedy have to happen to her? Why



not a murderer or a child molester or someone who deserved it? Why \_Bella? \_Emma knew she'd drive herself crazy dwelling on it, so she instead turned to her phone. She was surprised to see a message from Ash.

\_Call me, \_it read. \_I've got news. \_

"I'll be right back," Emma said, standing up. "Ash wants me to call him. He apparently texted me fifteen minutes ago. Hmm, I guess my phone must've been on silent."

Rikki and Cleo both nodded at her while Bella continued to cry into Cleo's side.

Emma headed into Cleo's kitchen to give Bella some space and dialed Ash's number. She idly wondered what kind of news Ash might have. Hopefully good, whatever it was. Emma had had enough of heartbreak these past few days; Not only was Bella blind, but she was obviously hiding somethingâ€”no one just had a seizure like that out of the blue. Lewis was eighteen years old and had a three (almost four) week old daughter, and his baby-mama was a bipolar basket case. Oh, and the lunar eclipse was just hours away. Yeah, Emma's first few days home have been absolutely \_fantastic\_. She hadn't even gotten a chance to spend quality time with Cleo and Rikki yetâ€¦| \_Just \_Cleo and Rikki.

"Hey Em," Ash answered chipperly. "Guess what?"

Emma smiled at the excitement in his voice. "Hmmâ€¦| You love me?"

"Well, yes, but that's old news. I have \_new \_news."

"Oh, do you now?" She chuckled.

"I'll be back on the Gold Coast tomorrow night!"

The phone nearly slid out of Emma's hand. She grinned brightly and covered her mouth with her hand, happy tears threatening to spill.

"What? Really?!"

"Yep!" He replied. "My sister just had a baby. I was only going to be in town for a few days, but I'm debating on moving back. Think you could help me check out some apartments while I'm there? Just to get an idea? If there's something available hopefully I can be moved in within the next month or so."

He was coming back. Ash was actually coming back and, even better, he was considering \_moving back\_. Emma could hardly contain her excitement. Shortly before she left for her trip around the world, Ash and his father had moved to Perth. They'd managed to keep their relationship alive, though. \_Love doesn't know distance, \_Ash had told her. \_We can do this. \_He'd been right, too. They did.

"Wow. I can't believe it. You're actually coming back!"

Ash chuckled. "I am. It'sâ€”oh, I gotta' go Em. I'll see you tomorrow night though, okay? D'you still live in the same place?"

"Yeah," She replied, happiness swelling in her chest. "I'll see you then. I love you."

"Love you too, Em."

He ended the call and Emma resisted the urge to squeal in delight. She quickly rejoined her friends in the living room. It looked like Bella had, thankfully, calmed down. She was actually laughing along to something Rikki or Cleo must've said, and Rikki and Cleo were laughing too. It was almost as if Bella wasn't now perpetually staring into a void of darkness.

"What'd Ash want?" Rikki asked, noting Emma's presence as she rejoined them.

"He's coming back," Emma replied enthusiastically. "Ash is actually going to be here tomorrow night! Heâ€" "

Emma was cut off by the sound of Lewis and Zane fumbling through Cleo's front door. Or, more accurately, it was the sound of Lewis struggling with all the tape and tarps through Cleo's front door. Zane followed behind him with Elena, obviously over-satisfied with himself.

"What is that?" Bella asked. \_I can't see. \_

"S'just us." Lewis said, dropping the supplies and setting his hands on his hips. He gave Zane a \_look\_. "Thanks for the help, Zane. I really appreciated it."

"I'm on baby duty." Zane replied. Elena gurgled at him and he laughed, completely amused by her. It wasn't hard to see, even despite the macho facade Zane often tried to keep up, that Elena had him wrapped around her little finger.

"Ugh huh." Cleo said with a goodnatured eye roll. She got up off the couch and took Elena from Zane. "You two," She gestured at him and Lewis. "Need to get all the windows taped up. This is our first lunar eclipse since the water tentacle and we need to be extra cautious. Especially since we've got Elena with us."

Lewis and Zane nodded before gathering up their supplies and heading to work. They had a lot of windows to cover.

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Claire couldn't sleep.

Her mind was a flurry of anxious activity that bounced between her brother's impending arrival, her turbulent relationship with Elena and Lewis, and an armada of other rampant thoughts. She was exhausted, both emotionally and psychically, though still she couldn't will herself into slumber. Claire debated on going for a swim. It was only a little after ten o'clock, surely there'd be someone on the beach still. Although since she hadn't been able to enjoy the water since she'd gotten pregnant, Claire decided she was going to get in the water whether she was alone (which she wasn't fond of) or not. She slipped on a pair of sandals, exited her hotel room, and walked down to the beach. She was more than content to wear

her shorts and tank top in the water\_â€"-\_there wasn't any force in heaven or on earth that could get her in a bikini after gaining nearly forty pounds. \_  
><em>

Unfortunately the beach was deserted. Claire sighed, feeling a little uneasy, as she slid her shoes off and walked into the surf. She loved the way the wet sand felt beneath her feet. The seawater was cool and there was a warm briny wind blowing in from off the horizon. For the first time in months Claire finally felt at peace. There was no parasite growing and moving within her, no pair of haunted blue eyes worrying and fretting over her and their child, no judgmental gazes. It was just her and the water and she could breathe again.

Claire walked until the water was up to her shoulders, then she swam out until she couldn't touch. She giggled when she felt a fish brush against her bare foot. It'd been so long since she'd felt this good, this like herself. The last time she'd been so relaxed and at ease with the world was when\_â€"- \_

( \_"You've got a girlfriend, don't you?" \_

\_"Not technically, we're on break." \_

\_Claire laughed and propped herself up on one elbow. "On break? Oh please, if I a dollar for every time I heard that excuse I'd be one rich bitch." \_

\_"It's true." Lewis said nonchalantly, carding a hand through his freshly showered hair. "Although I'm pretty sure she's going to break up with me again. At this point I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop. I don't know what she wants, she doesn't know what she wantsâ€| I think it's for the best." \_

\_"Well, she obviously doesn't know what she's missing." Claire leered, crawling toward the end of the bed and grabbing the edge of the towel that was wrapped around Lewis's waist. She yanked him onto the bed with her and flung the towel across the room. "Her loss, my gain." \_

\_She met his mouth halfway for a filthy kiss. \_)

-\_â€"-\_Claire groaned, the peace of the moment gone. The memory sent images of Elena's little face flooding through her brain (if said memory hadn't occurred she wouldn't even be \_in \_this mess) and a new wave of emotional confusion swept over her. She wanted to love Elena, she really did, but she couldn't stop associating Elena with the traumatic pregnancy she endured, not to mention the endless hours of agonizing labor. Part of Claire wished she could go back to the weeks before she'd met Lewis, when she lived with Ash and met with her swim team Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and could spend the days she wasn't applying for colleges lazying around in the summer sun. She felt trapped now, trapped and anxious and scared and guilty. Lewis didn't deserve this. He was a nice guy, a \_really nice\_ guy, and he had a nice girlfriend and even nicer friends and Claire hated that he was now saddled with a kid because of her. She'd been such a bitch to everyone lately too, but it wasn't like it was on purpose. Claire knew she hadn't been the same ever since she'd lost her sister to a high risk pregnancy.

Despite her fears, Claire still couldn't find it in her to regret Elena. In the morning, she decided, she'd give Lewis and call and see if he wanted to meet up. She was determined now to hold her baby for the first time, even if it meant swallowing a panic attack. After all, Ash did want to meet his niece.

Mind made up, Claire flipped over and began to practice her backstroke. She had a plan for tomorrow and, for right now, that was all she needed.

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"Can I \_help you?\_"

"No," Zane said innocently, as though his arms weren't wrapped around Rikki's waist and his chin wasn't hooked over her shoulder. He kissed the underside of her jaw. "I don't think so. I'm pretty good."

"So you're just clinging to me for kicks then?" She asked with an amused smirk as she poured herself a glass of Dr. Pepper.

"Maybe it's because you're soft and warm and you smell nice."

Leaving her glass on the counter, Rikki twisted in Zane's grip so she could face him and press a kiss to his mouth. "You're up to something."

"I'm always up to something."

She quirked an eyebrow. "May I remind you we're in Cleo's kitchen?"

"May I ask when're we going to tell them?"

"Shoosh!" Rikki said quickly as she covered his mouth with her hand. "We will. Soon. I promise. Justâ€¦ give me a little more time, okay? I don't know what the big rush is. It's not like I'm knocked up. We can take as much time as we need."

Zane licked her hand so she'd remove it from his mouth.

"There's no rush." He replied over Rikki's cry of \_ew, Zane! What are you, five?! \_She wiped her hand on her shorts while he spoke. "What? I can't be excited?"

"Yes, you can be excited. I'm excited too. Let's just let things settle down first, okay? Especially now that Bella'sâ€¦" She paused, reluctant to say the word. "Blind." \_  
><em>

Zane kissed her again, softer and slower than their previous one. "Okay."

Rikki grinned brightly at him before grabbing her glass of Dr. Pepper and heading back toward the living room. Before she could rejoin them, however, she shrieked loudly and dropped her suddenly very frozen beverage. It shattered on the linoleum kitchen floor. Within seconds Cleo, who still had Elena bundled in her arms, and Emma and Bella, who was holding Lewis's hand since she couldn't yet get around

by herself, were all crowding around her.

"What happened?!" Emma asked, concerned.

"My drink. I froze my drink. I \_froze it\_, Emma."

"Youâ€¦ froze it?"

"I froze it! I\_â€¦\_I\_â€¦" \_\_Rikki extended her hand over the mess and tried to melt the frozen pieces of Dr. Pepper. Nothing happened. Her heart dropped into her stomach. "I can't heat it."

Cautiously Emma extended her hand too. The frozen chunks of soda briefly liquified before transforming into jelly.

"What's happening?" Bella asked, squeezing Lewis's hand fearfully. She reached out with her free one to balance against the refrigerator.

"I think," Cleo began, dumfounded. "Our powers changed. Or got switched. Emma just jelly-fied the ice Rikki made."

"What can you do?" Lewis asked.

Cleo could tell he was \_just itching \_to take Elena from her, but at the same time he didn't want to let go of Bella's hand. Ever since she'd been released from the hospital they'd all been taking turns helping Bella get around through hand holding. She was having an extremely hard time coping, although who could blame her? Cleo didn't know what she'd do if suddenly lost her sight. Cry, definitely.

Cleo handed Elena to Zane before turning to jellied Dr. Pepper on her floor. She raised her hand and it almost instantaneously melted.

"Oh God, oh no, no no noâ€¦"-

"Cleo," Rikki warned. "Don't panic. Panicking only makes it worse."

"I can't help it!" Cleo exclaimed, voice raised. Elena fussed in her arms, reacting to her raised voice. "Fire is your thing, not mine! What if I can't control it?! What if I hurt someone?!"

"You're not going to hurt anybody." Rikki replied, awkwardly taking Elena from her. She was trying to reassure Cleo that, \_no\_, as long as she stayed calm she wouldn't hurt anyone, but Rikki never had been good at the whole \_comforting \_thing. She was more of a suffer in silence sort of girl. "Strong emotions trigger outbursts of power, right? Isn't that what you said, Lewis? Justâ€¦seriously, calm down Cleo. Sit down. We'll figure this out. As long as you don't panic, you're not going to hurt anyone."

Cleo nodded. "Alright, okay."

She squatted down to pick up the shattered glass, but the moment she reached for the counter to support herself the shirt on Zane's back burst into flames.

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><p><strong>an:\*\* ooh, cliffy! muhaha. sorry there was no clewis in this chapter, it got pushed back. :/ it'll be in the next chapter though. :) anyway! what'd you guys think? coming up next: is zane going to be hurt? or will being caught on fire be a fluke to laugh about later on? what exactly are him and rikki hiding? will bella ever able to get used to her blindness? what do i have in store for cleo and lewis later on? ash is going to be back next chapter as well, what will happen when he discovers lewis is elena's father? and just where are will and sophie tonight? stay tuned, cuties! next update around 55 or so reviews. x

## 8. In The Velvet Night

### 7. In The Velvet Night

It happened so quickly that Zane's mind couldn't even register what was going on. One moment he was talking with Rikki and the next, all of sudden, his mind short circuited and all he knew was that he'd been engulfed in a white hot, excruciating heat and it was eating through his shirt and licking wildly up his bare skin. A scream ripped itself from his throat as he stumbled backwards, confused and in pain, and sent the still open two liter of Dr. Pepper sitting on Cleo's kitchen counter flying and soaking Emma and Rikki. Zane didn't notice Rikki as she thrust Elena into Lewis's arms just seconds before her and Emma transformed and hit the ground. He didn't notice the shocked horror written all over Cleo's face. He could hardly hear Bella's panicked "what's going on?!" over the sound of his own racing blood.

All Zane could see, hear, and feel was fire. He was almost certain it had swallowed him whole.

Rikki thrust her hand out and extinguished the flames with her newfound power.

"Zane?" She asked worriedly. "Are you okay?"

He was panting, his entire overheated frame quivering. Rikki couldn't tell if the quaking came from the pain he was probably in or the adrenaline he was surely feeling. Large patches of his skin were now an angry, blotchy red from where he'd been on fire and the shirt he'd been wearing was virtually nonexistent, tattered and mostly reduced to ash.

"Zane?" Rikki asked again.

He nodded. "I'mâ€| Yeah, I'm okay. I'll be okay. It isn't that bad."

"You're not blistered or anything," Lewis began, approaching Zane. He gently touched one of the burns with his free hand, causing Zane to flinch. "So I'd say this is just a first degree burn." \_I'd know, I've had much worse. \_Lewis doesn't say. "You're not going to scar and you don't need to go to the hospital, but we'll have to keep a lot of ice on it. Or you could get in a tub of ice water, that'd probably be easier."

"I'm so sorry, Zane." Cleo said, lip trembling. "I didn't mean to, Iâ€"

Zane cut her off quickly. "It's okay, Cleo. It was just an accident. I'm okay. Lewis even said so. Believe me, I've been burnt worse by my motorbike."

"I \_told\_ \_you\_," She said hoarsely, beginning to cry. "I told you I'd hurt someone!"

"Ssh, Cleo no," Lewis gently began as he walked over to her and pulled her in for a hug. He pressed a kiss to her temple. "It's okay. It wasn't your fault. Magic is justâ€¦"

"Unpredictable." Emma finished.

"Why don't you try and dry us off?" Rikki asked. "Because I could seriously use my legs right about now."

"I don't want to catch \_you \_on fire too."

"You're not going to catch us on fire. Just try it."

Without moving from Lewis's embrace, Cleo cautiously reached out and attempted to dry her two transformed friends. Steam slowly raised from both Emma and Rikki's tails, and within a few seconds the two had their legs back.

Rikki smiled at Cleo as she stood up. "See? I told you that you wouldn't hurt us."

Cleo returned the smile wetly as she rested her head against Lewis's chest. Resting in the arm that wasn't wrapped around her waist, Elena stared curiously at her. Cleo broadened her smile at the little one and slid a finger into one of Elena's hands. Elena squeezed it and turned her head away from Cleo to observe the finger she was holding onto. Despite not being her own, Cleo knew the heartwarming love she felt for Elena was pure and genuine. Elena was such an innocent and precious part of Lewis, and the fact Lewis trusted Cleo with Elena, especially considering how protective he could be, made Cleo's heart warm even further. She wanted to tell Lewis she loved him so badly, especially in moments like these when he was so gentle and comforting, but Cleo knew the time wasn't right. Not now, not when Zane was still frozen in place because it hurt so badly to move and Bella was clinging to the refrigerator because her blindness was still too new for her to be used to.

"We'll get through tonight," Lewis said. "Just like we always do. Together."

"Why'd our powers change? Or switch, I guess."

"I've got no idea." He replied. "Although, to be honest? I'm not sure of anything anymore."

"Even me?" She asked timidly.

Lewis chuckled quietly into her hair. "You know I'll always be sure of you. We're a team, remember?"

\_We're a team, remember? \_Cleo's mind flashed back to the night Elena was born, the same night she'd said exactly that.

( \_"You don't have to do this, Cleo." Lewis began, voice threatening to tremble. "Support me, I mean. I know you've got to be angry at me. I'm your boyfriend and I've got a kid with another woman. I justâ€¦ I felt soâ€¦" He sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. For everything."\_

\_"You don't have to apologize Lewis. I'm not angry with you. I'm upset, yeah. Really upset. It's going to take me a long time to get over this, but I'm not angry and I'm not going to abandon you or Elena. I was the one who said I needed space to figure things out. I just didn't know what I wanted for myself, I still don't, but you know what I do know? That I'm positively, absolutely, one hundred percent sure of? That I want you. We're going to get through this. Someway, somehowâ€¦ We'll find a way to make it. Okay? Besides, what little girl do you know of who doesn't want to meet a real mermaid?"\_

\_When Lewis chuckled softly the tears built up in his eyes began to run down his cheeks.\_

\_"I don't deserve you." He said. "I really don't."\_

\_Cleo leaned in to gently kiss him on the mouth. "You do. You really do. We're a team. \_)

"Yeah," She replied happily. "I remember."

"I hate to break up the little love fest here," Zane interjected. "-â€¦but I'm going to go take an extremely cold shower."

"I'm really confused." Bella said from her spot by the refrigerator.

"Apparently all of our powers switched," Emma said, slipping her hand into Bella's and leading her toward the couch. Rikki and Cleo and Lewis followed behind her. "Cleo just lit Zane on fire, Rikki froze all the Dr. Pepper, and I can makeâ€¦ jelly, of some sort."

"That was my power," Bella replied, sitting down. "I can gelatinize."

"I don't get it." Lewis mused aloud. He sat down on the love-seat opposite of the couch, Elena laying contently on his chest. Cleo curled up next to him while Rikki and Emma sat on either side of Bella in an attempt to make her feel a little more secure. "None of you were directly exposed to the eclipse, or even the moon beforehand. Why would your powers go haywire all of a sudden?"

"You know as much as we do, Lewis." Emma answered, sighing. "I think we should just sit tight until morning."

"I agree with Emma for once." Rikki added. "We can just, ughâ€¦"

"Watch a movie?" Bella finished. "Go ahead guys, seriously. I can still listen."

"Are you sure?" Cleo asked.



Bella nodded. "Positive."

"Well, then what're we in the mood f  r?"

Cleo's question was cut off by the sound of her front door opening and a pair of heavy boots stepping inside.

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"\_Tu sei il mio soldatino, la ragione per cui vivo, non ti scordar di me  |\_" Claire sang, peering up at the star spattered sky. She was laying on the beach, recuperating from her strenuous swim, and enjoying the warm night and solitude. It felt as though it'd been ages since she last had a moment of peace. "\_Eri il mio soldatino, ora un principe oscuro, ma anche per te, c'   una luce, che ad un'altra vita ti conduce.\_"

"That's a beautiful song." Came an unfamiliar feminine voice. It caused Claire to jump.

"Oh, ugh, thank you?" She said, getting to her feet. Claire wiped the sand from her shorts and was, upon seeing the shorthaired stranger's delicate face and pretty features, struck by familiarity. "Hey, you work at the caf   right?"

The woman smiled pleasantly at her, though behind that smile, Claire could tell, something dark festered. "That I do. I'm Sophie, the assistant manager."

She extended her hand and Claire reached out to shake it, returning Sophie's smile with one of her own.

"I'm Claire." She replied. "So, if you don't mind me asking, what is you're doing out here so late?"

Not wearing a swimsuit and completely dry, Sophie was dressed casually in a pair of white shorts and a tanktop. It was obvious she wasn't out swimming, and the sandals on her feet told Claire she wasn't out running either.

"My brother and I were out night diving." She replied. "Or, well, \_he\_ was diving. I was just driving the boat."

"So he's out there  | by himself?" Claire asked, casting a glance toward the sea. She worried briefly. Surely Sophie wouldn't let her brother out in those rough waves alone.

"No," Sophie assured her. "He's just grabbing his dive gear from the boat. We were getting ready to head up to the car when I heard that voice of yours. I couldn't resist investigating."

Claire chuckled shyly and tucked a strand of wet hair behind her ear. "I'm not that good. It's just something I catch myself doing sometimes."

"You're more than good, you're excellent. Zane should really hear you sing. The caf   could really use a replacement for the next few weeks, or for as long as it takes for Bella to get her sight back."

"What?" Claire asked, confused. What did Sophie mean by \_get her sight back\_?

"Didn't you hear about Bella? Apparently she a bad seizure and hit her head. She's blind now." Sophie replied, rather nonchalantly. Claire got the impression she didn't like Bella much.

"Oh my God, that's terrible." \_God\_, was it terrible. Bella was such a sweet girl, she didn't deserve to have her sight stolen from her. Claire thought back to how terrible she'd acted toward Bella and her friends, toward \_Lewis\_, and guilt weighed heavy on her heart. How could she make them all see that wasn't the real her? That she'd felt scared and isolated and mad at the world and she really wasn't the coldhearted bitch they'd been forced to deal with as of late?

"Anyway, like I said," Sophie continued. "You should really let Zane hear you sing. It'd be nice to have a change for once."

Claire laughed anxiously. "You do know Zane is terrified of me, right? I don't sing in front of people anyway. Have Bella come back. You don't need to see to sing."

"You need to see if you're preforming. What if she falls off the stage? Or runs into someone? Do you know how unprofessional that'd be me look? C'mon Claire, at least let me talk to Zane and see what he thinks. We'll pay you."

"I don't know, Sophie. Iâ€"

Will's voice interrupted her. "Soph? Are you over here?"

"Over here!" Sophie called. She turned back to Claire. "Sorry, that's my brother."

Will came trotting over to the two of them. He waved awkwardly at Claire.

"Oh. Hi Claire." He said. "I see you've met my sister."

"You two know each other?" Sophie asked.

"Yeah. She is Elena's mum. Her and Lewis are kind ofâ€| Ugh, a strangely packaged deal now?"

"I'm trying to stick around for Elena, I've just got some stuff to work through first. Some really complicated and shitty stuff." Claire was silent for a moment, unsure of what to say. "Listen Will, can you please tell Bella I'm sorry? Not just for her eyesight, but for everything? I've been awful these last few months I know but, I don't know, it's justâ€|" She fumbled for words. "Just tell everyone I'm sorry, okay? Tell them that I'm trying and that I'm really not who you think I am. I'm not some coldhearted antisocial bitch. It's just been really hard and I probably haven't slept in like three months and yeah. Just let them know I'm sorry? Um, I've gotta' get back to my hotel now but I'll see you around?"

Will nodded, perplexed at Claire's seemingly awkward one eighty in personality. "Ugh, okay?"

"Thanks," Claire said. "And Sophie? I'll think about it. I'll drop by tomorrow so we can talk."

"Fantastic!" Sophie chirped. "C'mon Will, you've got studying to do."

Claire began her walk back to her seaside hotel while Sophie dragged Will back to his boat shed, both her heart and mind racing. She really couldn't wait until Ash got back. Her mind drifted to the text message Lewis had accidentally sent her. \_Be careful, \_It had read. \_Eclipse tonight. I'll be over a little later. Me & Zane are getting the black tarps and tape. How is Bella adjusting? \_She was still incredibly confused by it. What could Lewis possibly need tarps and tape for? And what did it have to do with the eclipse? Was it a science experiment of some sort? Claire idly remembered Lewis mentioning he was double majoring in Marine Biology and Physics.

\_Hey, where are you? \_She decided to text back. \_Give me a call when you get this. \_

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Ash arrived on the Gold Coast at eleven thirty, exactly as he'd planned.

It felt strange staying in his childhood home after being away for nearly two years. A good strange, though. He'd missed the Gold Coast, not to mention Emma, dearly. Perth just wasn't what he'd expected it to be, especially once Claire left for Italy. A entire year and a half she'd been gone, leaving Ash to his veterinary studies alone. But now? Now Ash felt fantastic. He was going to surprise Emma by showing up to her house early tomorrow (with a dozen white roses, of course; her favorite), then he was going to take her to dinner and ask her to be his wife. He was going to get to spend time with Claire and his new baby niece. If Emma said yes, then the next few days were going to absolutely perfect. Ash slid his hand into his pocket and played with the little velvet box Emma's engagement ring was housed in. As anxious as he was about asking, he still couldn't wait until tomorrow night.

Exhausted from the long drive, Ash left his luggage unpacked and decided to call it a night. It was a miracle he didn't fall asleep behind the wheel. He pulled his shirt off and tossed it in the general direction he'd kicked his pants before crawling into bed.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>an\*\*: there you have it! chapter seven. :) this actually took a whole different direction than i'd originally had planned, so again some stuff got pushed back and moved around (f you're a writer yourself, you'll understand why that keeps happening haha). i kept the clewis though! anyway, this chapter is actually a major turning point. who was that coming through cleo's door? and who did he or she bring with them? it may surprise you. and will claire take up sophie's offer? how will the others react to that? and what does she want to talk to lewis about? ash is going to meet up with the others tomorrow and finally meet elena, and we'll also see the rest of the eclipse's effect on our mermaids. it didn't stop at the powers, just wait until they get wet! ;) stay tuned, dearies. like i said before,

i have lots planned! next update at 65 reviews (oh, and once i get to 70? i'll be announcing a little game. with prizes!). tell me what you think. x

## 9. Eclipsed

8. á'†á'„ÊÿÉªá'~sá'†á'...

Claire couldn't stop thinking about Sophie's offer.

It didn't sound like that appealing of a job, but Sophie did say there'd be pay involved and Claire knew she'd need the money soon. She'd stayed with Lewis until Elena was born and then she'd gotten herself a hotel room (Lewis had said she didn't have to leave right away, that she could stay however long she needed to, but Claire didn't want to feel like a mooch. -â€"not to mention Elena would be an ever-constant reminder of the traumatic pregnancy she'd endured). After nearly a month at the hotel, Claire's funds were starting to run low. Singing at the caf  certainly wasn't the worst job she could end up with, and Sophie had been incredibly generous (if not a little eager) offering it to her, but aside from her hatred of crowds and the anxiety of performing in front of one of those said crowds, Claire didn't want to steal Bella's thunder. Bella had a beautiful voice and Claire, as awful as she'd the been to everyone the last couple months and in light of recent events, was anxious about "replacing her."

It wouldn't be permanent, of course, though the point still remained; Claire would be Bella's replacement. The very thought made her sick to her stomach. Right now the absolute last the thing she wanted to do was stir up more drama, especially since she wanted to get the good side of Lewis's friends for Elena's sake. â€|but she really did need the money. Claire idly considered asking Sophie if she could work as a waitress instead, but Claire knew she didn't have the patience or attitude to deal with rude and impatient customers. At the moment, it seemed, singing was her best bet.

Claire sighed as she checked her phone for the third time. Lewis still hadn't texted her back. She decided she'd give him twenty minutes before giving in and calling, because seriously? What on earth could he be up to this late at night? And with black tarps and tape? Not that it actually mattered, Claire was more concerned with Elena. God, did she want to see her little girl. â€|but could she get through a visit without spiraling into a panic attack? That was the question.

Claire really hoped she could.

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/ Four Months Earlier /

\_Lewis hasn't told Cleo yet. He hasn't told anyone.\_

\_It's been nearly two days since Claire called and dropped the bomb, and despite his desperate attempts to do so Lewis couldn't get her voice out of his head. It was still echoing throughout the dark recesses of his mind and drowning him in guilt. \_I'm pregnant\_. Claire informed him flatly. \_It's yours. Call me as soon as you get

this.\_

Once he'd selected her contact from his phone with trembling fingers and managed to swallow the knot of fear lodged in his throat, Lewis called her. As expected, it was a relatively short conversation.

"Claire?" He asked quickly, hardly letting her finish her "hello."

"Hey," She replied. "I'm assuming you got my voicemail."

"Yeah. Are you sure?"

Claire sighed on the other end of the line. She sounded just as mortified as he was. "Six tests sure."

"Oh my God." Lewis was silent for a moment, at a loss for words. He was sure his heart was going to stop beating. "You're not planning on keeping it, are you?"

"I didn't," She began, and the knot in Lewis's throat tripled in size. Didn't, that implied Claire was now, in fact, thinking about keeping it. "But that was before I went to the doctor yesterday. I'm too far along to legally have an abortion."

"Too far along?" He repeated, nearly breathless with shock. "Jesus, how far along are you?"

"Twenty four weeks."

"Twenty four?! How is that possible?! Didn't you just find out?!"

"Yeah, but apparently not all women swell up like a balloon right away. Some women don't even show at all. Haven't you seen that show I Didn't Know I Was Pregnant? I really don't think I'm going to be that lucky though. I noticed my pants have been a little tight the last few days, but I just thought I was bloated, probably getting ready to start. My period has always been irregular. But then, when I couldn't button my favorite shorts, I gave in and weighed myself. I've put on fifteen pounds, and now that I really look I do have a little bit a bump. Not enough to tell yet, but it's there. It also explains all the nausea."

Silence.

"Lewis? You still there?"

"Yeah." He replied, overcome with nausea of his own although his wasn't caused by a growing fetus, but by anxiety and fear. "Yeah, I'm still here."

"I'm coming back to the Gold Coast. I hope that isn't too forward, but we really need to talk and figure out what we're doing. Not to mention I don't want my brother finding out yet. I'm afraid he's going to start getting suspicious. I turned down wine last night, Lewis. Wine."

Lewis managed a breathy chuckle. "No, it's not too forward at all.

I'll go ahead and text you my address, I live alone soâ€"\_"

\_She cut him off. "Wait, you live alone? Aren't you still in high school?"\_

\_"Yeah, I got emancipated when I was sixteen though." Lewis reluctantly began. He really didn't want to get into this with her. Or anyone, for that matter. "I've been working at Griffith's science center to pay for my apartment. I start my classes this fall."\_

\_"Impressive." Claire replied, resisting the urge to ask about the emancipation. She didn't want to pry at blatantly bad memories, but leaving home at sixteen? And getting a court to side in his favor? It piqued her curiosity. "So, I'll see you soon then? I'll call you when I get back on the coast. It should only be a day or two."\_

\_"Yeah, I'll see you Claire."\_

\_"You too, Lewis."\_

\_He ended the call before running to his bathroom to vomit.\_

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/ Present Day /

"Who's here?" Bella asked, turning her head toward the source of footsteps. It was strange just how much better she could hear now that was blind. She'd heard the slight creak of the door as it opened, the foreign pair of boots taking exactly five steps insideâ€"-she was hearing and taking notice of things she'd otherwise pay no mind to.

"Iâ€| don't know." Cleo replied, subconsciously scooting closer to Lewis. The strange man with short sandy hair and a square jaw that now stood in her home looked to be a ranger of some sort. He was dressed in shorts and a button up shirt, all khaki.

Cleo made herself stand and approached him, anxiety rising. She hated that she'd become so mistrustful of strangers, but ever since she'd become a mermaid, and especially since her altercation with Dr. Linda Denman, Cleo made sure to keep the strictly human world at an arm's length. Her and her friends' secret was too important to risk.

"Um, hi?" She began. "Can I help you?"

"You must be Cleo. Orâ€| Kim, I believe?" He replied, extending a hand. "I'm Ryan Tate. I work with Sam at the National Parks Authority. She'll be in just a second."

Relief flooded through Cleo. I work with Sam. "Oh! Well, hello then. I'm Cleo. Kim is my little sister. My dad is chaperoning her and her boyfriend at the movies."

"Ah, gotcha." Ryan said with a smile. "You look like a Cleo, a beautiful girl to go with a beautiful name."

"I know she is," Came Lewis's voice as he descended the stairs. Cleo groaned inwardly, of all moments for him to come downstairs... It

just \_had to be\_ the one where she was getting hit on. Fantastic.  
"That is one of the many reasons she's my girlfriend."

Cleo elbowed him when he joined her and Ryan. "Be nice, Lewis. He works with Sam."

"I'm always nice." He said, feigning offense, before turning to Ryan. "I'm Lewis, and I see you've already met Cleo."

Ryan chuckled, embarrassed. "Yeah. Ya' know, you look really familiar. Do you go to Griffith, by any chance?"

"My classes don't start until the fall, but I do work there. In the lab."

"That's where I've seen you! I frequent there pretty often, Griffith's lab is a lot more advanced than mine. What do you plan on majoring in?"

"Marine Biology and Physics. I might do a little minoring in astrology, as well."

"Really?" Ryan asked, intrigued. "I'm a geophysicist myself."

Amused, Cleo chuckled and rejoined the others.

"It's just one of Sam's coworkers," She informed them, plopping down in between Bella and a freshly showered Zane (his burns seemed to have lightened considerably, something she was incredibly thankful for). On the floor Rikki and Emma had Elena's diaper bag emptied, clothes and toys strewn about, and they were dressing her in a thousand different outfits. "Pretty sure him and Lewis are science buddies now, though."

"That really doesn't surprise me." Rikki retorted. "At least he can't get this one pregnant."

Emma shot her a dirty look while she gently pulled a rufflelely purple dress over Elena's head. She caved in and grinned, however, when Elena grabbed her thumb and began to babble.

"What?" Rikki asked with a shrug. "It's true."

"Hey Sam!" Cleo greeted suddenly, eagerly acknowledging her stepmother as she came into the living room in a desperate attempt to change these subject. A large black backpack was slung over her shoulder, one very similar to the one Ryan was sporting. It set Cleo on edge, though she couldn't quite put her finger on why.

"Hi Cleo," Sam replied pleasantly. "Having a good time with your friends?"

"You bet we are" Emma added, fixing a matching purple bow in Elena's hair. "I've missed our sleepovers."

Of course, once Sam caught sight of Elena she was setting the strange backpack on the floor and whisking her away. Elena cooed and babbled at her and Sam cooed right back, fussing about how precious she looked in her little sundress and her little socks. Elena's cooing

managed to pry Lewis, and by association Ryan, away from the conversation he was in long enough for the two of them to join the rest of the group.

Lewis looked at Emma and Rikki, who were still sitting in a mess of baby clothes and toys, in an amused though accusing way. "What did you two do to my child? She's drowning in ruffles."

"Dress up!" Rikki replied. "Well, Emma did most of the dressing up. I tried but she's squirmy."

"Ugh," Ryan said, gesturing toward the dining room. "Hold on a second. I'm confused. Why are all the windows covered in black tarps?"

Cleo's heart hit her stomach like a rock. She'd completely forgotten about the taped up windows. Bella thankfully already had an excuse in mind.

"It's for my benefit." She began. "I haven't been blind for very long so Cleo suggested we tape up all the windows and listen to a movie in the dark so I wouldn't feel left out while we marathoned. I told her she didn't have too though, it's totally okay. We took the tarp off the telly but haven't got to the windows yet."

"I'm so sorry Bella," Sam said sympathetically. "Is there anything we can do?"

"No, I'm adjusting, for the most part. I'll be okay though. It's just going to take some time to get used to."

Emma opened her mouth to comfort Bella but was cut off by the shrill ringing of Lewis's cellphone. Once Lewis fished it out of his back pocket and frowned down at the caller ID it was no question to anyone, except Sam and Ryan, as to who was calling.

"I, ugh, need to take this." Lewis said, answering the phone with a \_Hey, Claire \_before walking into the kitchen for privacy.

"I wonder what our favorite person wants." Rikki groused as she stood up. She proceeded to flop down in Zane's lap.

Zane snaked his arms around her waist. "Lewis's soul, probably. I think that's what her kind feed on."

Ryan lifted an eyebrow. "Her kind?"

"Yeah. \_Hell bitches\_. Seriously, this woman has no soul and the cold dead eyes of a shark\_."

"Little ears in the room, Zane." Sam chastised before pressing a kiss to Elena's forehead. "Isn't that right, sweetie? Precious little itty bitty ears."

"Yeah Zane." Emma teased. He stuck his tongue out at her.

Ryan began to ask who said hell bitch was but before he got the chance Lewis came striding back into the room, Claire still on the line. He held the phone out to Zane.



"She wants to talk to you." He said, perplexed.

Zane blinked. "What?"

"She wants to talk to you."

"No."

Lewis groaned. "Zane, oh my God, just take the phone."

"Tell her I moved to Spain," Zane replied. "Or died. Yeah, tell her I wrecked my motorbike just like she wanted me to. Wait, no. She'd get too much satisfaction out of that. Just tell her I'm dead."

"\_Zane\_."

"I'm not the one who knocked her up! Why am I being punished?"

Lewis shot Zane a particularly shitty look before returning to his conversation with Claire. "Zane said to tell you he's dead."

Rikki and Bella both laughed aloud, which left Cleo smiling. She didn't smile because Claire was probably going to rip Zane a new one tomorrow (which Rikki and Bella apparently found amusing), but because Bella was laughing. It was such a relief to know her newly blinded friend could still find joy and amusement in things. Bella had been unusually quiet and, seemingly, depressed ever since she'd left the hospital, but now she was starting to show signs of improvement.

"What did Claire want?" Cleo asked.

"We're going to meet up tomorrow. She really wants to see Elena, but she isn't sure she can, yet. Her brother will be there too, so hopefully he'll keep any panic attacks at bay." \_><em>

"Panic attacks?" Sam asked.

Lewis nodded. "Her story isn't mine to tell, but She went thought some stuff. Really bad stuff." \_It was pretty similar to what I went though, \_ He doesn't say. \_ What with our violent fathers and emotionally distant mothers and all, except I didn't lose my sibling to a high risk pregnancy. \_"Elena is a reminder of that. Being pregnant was really traumatic for her, but she's trying."

"Poor Dear." Same replied. "I hope things get better for her."

"I do too." \_For Elena and I's sake.\_

\_ "Why'd she want me?" Zane asked.

"Well you'd know if you'd have taken the call." Lewis began. "She said something about Sophie giving her a good offer. What kind of offer, though, I don't know. She just said she wanted to talk to you before she decided anything."

"Well, I hate to cut this short," Ryan said. "But Sam and I need to get to Mako Island before the eclipse. We've only got another

hour."

Cleo felt like she'd been punched. "Mako? What are two doing way out there?"

"A little bit of this and a little bit of that. Mostly observing the eclipse's effects on Mako," Ryan began. "I've never seen an island with such magnetic properties. It's incredible. Lewis, have you ever been out there?"

"Once or twice." He said as he took Elena from Sam. He held her close to him. "It's dangerous out there, you know. I doubt the National Parks Authority would want information on a deserted island surrounded by mako sharks."

"\_This is just a side project of ours." Sam clarified, grabbing the backpack she'd earlier set on the floor. "Ryan and I just needed to stop back here to grab a couple camera lenses we forgot. We'll get out of your hair now, don't worry."

Cleo had never been more worried in her life, and just when she thought things couldn't get any worse—

"I'm not risking it," Rikki said. "I'm following them out to Mako."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>an:\*\* sorry this update is so late! and sorry the chapter is such a mess—it gave me \_a lot\_ of trouble, which is why it's late (i also didn't get many new reviews last chapter and my writing muse was all blehh). but! at least we now we know why i started this fic a little after crime and punishment and before a magnetic attraction now. ryan. :D he isn't the only face coming back though. ;) anyway!; next chapter i'll be addressing the questions i didn't answer from the last a/n, and i'll also be starting the game! it has prizes! please leave your thoughts in a review, darlings. next update should be around 70. there will also be more foreshadowing to what's going on with zane and rikki in the next chapter. x

## 10. Eclipsed, Part 2

9. á'†á'„ÊÿÊªá'~sá'†á'..., á'~á'€Êªá'> 2

"Don't be stupid, Rikki! You can't go to Mako—"

Rikki cut Emma off, a dangerous mixture of fury and fear starting to bubble low in her gut. "Like hell if I can't! I'm going, and you can either come with me or stay here."

"Rikki, no. What about the Eclipse?" Cleo asked desperately. Her voiced trembled. She couldn't believe how quickly the night had turned terrible, but that was magic for you. It had a habit of changing pace on a dime, whether for better or worse. "What if the tentacle comes back?"

"And what if Sam and Ryan figure out Mako is magical, Cleo?!" Rikki snapped in reply. "What happens when they go tell the world and our special place gets taken away? I'm not going to sit here like a

coward and let that happen!"

"And what do you plan on doing, Rikki?" Lewis asked incredulously. "Seriously, what are you going to do when you get out there? Swim up to Sam and Ryan and ask them to leave? I didn't think so. All you're going to accomplish by going following them out there is putting yourself in harm's way. You'll be risking your secret, too."

Rikki narrowed her eyes at him, annoyed by the tone of his voice. "What do you plan on doing, Rikki?" "I'll start a forest fire if I have to."

"You can't start fires anymore." He shot back.

"I get that you're pissed," Lewis continued, shifting Elena to his other arm. She made a soft noise in her sleep and continued to suck on her thumb. "Believe me, I do, but you can't go recklessly throwing yourself into dangerous situations \_you know you can't control \_just because you're upset. What would you rather Sam and Ryan figure out? That Mako is magical? Or that you and your friends are?"

Rikki didn't say a word, just stood in the middle of Cleo's living room and fumed in her anger and overwhelming (though well hidden) vulnerability. Not even half a second later fractals of ice were spinning out from beneath her feet. The carpet on the floor, the coffee table, the bottom of the couch, even a few of Elena's toys—they were all covered now in a sheet of glittering ice. Icicles, sharp as straight razors and just as lethal, formed along the edges of the ceiling.

"What happened?" Bella asked, reaching for whoever was sitting next to her. It was Emma's hand she found herself grabbing onto. "Why'd it get so cold?"

"It's okay Bella." Emma reassured her, casting Rikki another dirty look. She loved her hot-tempered friend to death, she did, but sometimes Rikki had absolutely no tact. "Rikki accidentally froze the coffee table."

"What about Sam and Ryan? And Mako? What're we going to do?"

"We're going to sit tight." Emma replied, giving Bella's hand a squeeze. "We can go to Mako Island tomorrow, when we know for sure the eclipse is over. Cleo, maybe you could try and see what Sam and Ryan find out?"

Cleo nodded. "Hopefully they won't find out much."

"I doubt they will." Lewis said. "Ryan said him and Sam were interested in the eclipse's effects on Mako, that means they'll stick to the outer edges of the island. The jungle around the only land entrance to the moon pool is too thick to give a good view of the eclipse. Unless something—strange happens I don't think they'll bother leaving the beach."

"I'm going to take a bath." Rikki said flatly, turning toward the stairs. She couldn't be around anyone right now—her hands trembled, though whether it was from fear or anger she didn't know.

Lewis opened his mouth to say something along the lines \_that probably isn't such a good idea, Rikki \_but Cleo shook her head at him before he got the chance. He nodded softly in agreement, understanding that Rikki tended to need solitude when her temper was so dangerously flared. Emotionally exhausted from her worrying over Sam and Ryan trekking to Mako Island, Cleo wearily reclaimed her spot next to Lewis and leaned into his shoulder. She smiled when he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

"So," Zane began, gesturing toward the all the ice left in Rikki's wake. "Are we just going to leave the winter wonderland here all night orâ€|?"

"You should try and melt it, Cleo." Bella said enthusiastically.

Cleo shrugged her shoulders, unsure. "I don't know Bella. I already set one person on fire, I really don't want to set another."

"You're not going to set anyone else on fire." Emma reassured her. "You dried me and Rikki off just fine, melting all this ice will be a peace of cake."

Without budging from Lewis's side, Cleo extended her hand and gently curled her fingers inward. Steam steadily rose from the ice with a \_hssss \_as it began to melt, and within just a few minutes all the ice was melted, leaving the room damp. She kept her hand squeezed until the wetness evaporated.

Emma grinned at her friend when she glanced around the now returned-to-normal room. "See! I knew you could do it."

Zane suddenly stood up. He stretched his arms behind his back before stifling a yawn. "I think I'm going to go check on Rikki."

"Make sure you don't piss her off any worse," Lewis said seriously. "The madder she gets the more her powers are going to spiral out of control. Ice can be just as dangerous as fire."

"I doubt that." Zane said with a hint of bitterness. Cleo tried not to take it personally.

Zane disappeared up the stairs, leaving Lewis and Cleo and Emma and Bella to themselves.

"We should probably try and get some sleep." Emma suggested.

Cleo nodded in agreement. She wanted this night to be over more than anything.

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4:26 A.M. It was an hour that haunted Claire.

She hadn't slept a full night through since Elena was born, and not because she was tending to a needy infant. Claire often found herself waking from a nightmare in the early morning hours, reliving the difficultâ€"endlessâ€"hours of labor she went through. She remembered everything so vividly, so sharply. It was just as sharp as the pain she felt. The overwhelming and reeking scent of antiseptic, the

ungodly blinding white of the hospital room, the flurry of nurses in their pale green scrubs, the burn of vomit rushing up her throat and out her nose when the searing pain became too much, the warmth of Lewis's hand as she gripped it with iron strength and \_screamed\_”-

It was another one of those nights. She'd tried to go to bed when she returned home from her swim, but when thoughts of Sophie's offer slipped away and gave way to sleep, the memories (the \_nightmare\_) once again tore her from slumber. Even as she laid alone in the dark Claire tried to keep the tears from falling. Crying made her feel so weak. It made her think of all the horrid things her father used to say to her. \_Quit your crying or I'll give you something to cry about! \_

He often did.

Claire felt like a fucking basketcase. Most women didn't have nervous breakdowns after they had a baby. They spent their days bonding with their new child and feeling happier than they'd ever felt before. It's how Lydia would've felt. Lydia would've been an incredibly mum. She wanted to be a mother so badly, and after two miscarriages she was finally able to carry a baby to term, but then” The tears that were welled in Claire's eyes finally started leaking down her cheeks (thoughts of her deceased sister often had that effect on her). God, did she miss Lydia. She missed how they use to ride horses together and bake apple cobblers and, perhaps most importantly, protect one another from their father. Ash, being the boy, usually never felt the brunt of their father's wrath. Just whenever he tried to stand to stand up for his sisters.

Claire turned over onto her side and hugged the pillow she wasn't using close to her. She couldn't wait until Ash arrived.

Right now she needed him more than ever.

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"Oh my God\_, \_Zane. Look," Amused, Rikki gestured toward the clock on the wall. "It's almost seven, we literally talked\_ all night\_."

Zane laughed. "I told you if I stayed up here with you we would."

"Oh well, sleep is for losers anyway." She laid her head against his chest, pretending to be much less tired than she was actually was.

When Zane had come upstairs hours earlier to check on Rikki he hadn't planned on slipping into the bathtub with her and talking about anything and everything under the sun until the quiet morning hours, but his burns had start to hurt again. Really badly. It had taken some maneuvering to get both him and his mermaid girlfriend into the tub, and eventually Rikki, tail and all, ended up on Zane's lap so she could cool both the water and his back directly. It was amusing to see his legs stretched out next to her tail. ”her now very different, very changed tail.

"So, when're you going to alert the others to this development here?" Zane gestured toward Rikki's tail.

It wasn't golden anymore, but instead a deep teal streaked in varying shades of grey and black. She had two large coal black pectoral fins as well, and a shark-like dorsal fin, also black, that was currently digging uncomfortably into Zane's thigh. He didn't mind, though. It had been too long since him and Rikki just enjoyed being close, since they'd talked all night.

"Eh, later. When they wake up. It's only seven." Rikki pressed a kiss to the underside of his jaw. "I like it in here with you, anyway."

"We're gonna' have to buy a huge bathtub, I hope you know."

"Yes. Oh, and a hot tub! With \_jets\_."

Zane chuckled into her damp hair. "I love you."

He froze. They both did. He hadn't meant to say it. Not yet. Zane meant it, of course, he loved Rikki more than the sun and moon and stars put together, but had he said it too soon? His heart began to hammer. What if she pushed him away? What if his confession overwhelmed her?

Rikki turned her head to meet his eyes. "What?"

Zane swallowed nervously. "I love you."

She's silent for a moment, and then— "I love you too."

Rikki took his face in both her hands and kissed his mouth.

"I love you." She said again, deliriously happy. All worried thoughts of Sam and Ryan and Mako Island and screwy magic had been, for the moment, forgotten. "I live on the Gold Coast and me and my best friends are mermaids and it's already hotter than Satan's asscrack outside and \_I love you\_."

It would've been a perfect moment if Lewis hadn't chosen to open the door and walk in on them at that very moment.

"\_Um\_." He said, putting his hands up. "I'm gonna close the door now and walk awa—" \_holy fuck\_, Rikki, your tail!"

"What happened to you closing the door and walking away?" Zane asked, irritated his and Rikki's moment was interrupted. It was their first \_I love you\_, goddammit.

"What happen to you checking on Rikki and coming back downstairs last night?" Lewis countered.

"Why? Did you miss me?"

"Yes Zane, more than life itself." Lewis deadpanned, stepping into the bathroom with them. "Jesus Rikki, what happened?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It was like that when I got in the tub. It isn't that big a deal, it's just a change in color."

"You've got pectoral fins." Lewis pointed out. "That's more than a

change in color. That's new appendages."

"She has a dorsal fin too." Zane added, gently pushing Rikki to the side as he got out of the bathtub. Stripped down to his soaking wet boxers, he turned his back to Lewis. "How're the burns? Any better?"

"Yeah," Lewis replied. "They're a lot less red. Are they any less painful?"

"For the most part. Still a little sore, though. Rikki's been keeping me iced."

Lewis nodded. "Well, you two get dried off. Everyone is already up. They're still pretty torn up about Sam and Ryan going out to Mako last night. I don't think Cleo slept any."

"Did you?" Zane asked, voice softening.

There was something in his tone that caught Rikki off guard. Something... secretive, almost. Like he knew something she didn't. It was Lewis's deflection that confirmed Rikki's suspicions.

"I'll meet you downstairs." He said before walking away.

Oh yeah, there was definitely a story there.

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"I don't get it!" Cleo groused, gesturing with her hands as she spoke. "Why won't she eat for me?"

"She's probably just used to me." Lewis replied, not looking away from his daughter's face. He was leaned casually against the kitchen counter, feeding Elena while Emma made breakfast.

"Annemarie was a really picky eater when she was little." Bella said from her spot at the kitchen table. "I think it's just a kid thing."

"What if she doesn't like me?" Cleo asked.

"She's not even a month old yet, Cleo." Emma said, quietly amused. "I highly doubt Elena had a personal vendetta against you."

"Emma has a point." Lewis added.

Rikki and Zane joined them in the kitchen then. Zane headed straight for the kitchen table and, once he'd grabbed a chair next to Bella, kicked his bare feet up on the table. Rikki rolled her eyes good-naturedly and grabbed a carton of orange juice from the fridge.

"So," Rikki began, setting the carton on the counter and grabbing herself a glass. "We've got new tails."

Cleo blinked, the information not quite registering. "What?"

"New tails. When I got in the bath last night mine was different. It's green and black now, with pectoral fins and a pretty badass

dorsal fin."

Emma and Cleo exchanged a worried look.

"And you couldn't have told us this last night?!" Emma asked.

Rikki shrugged. "It wasn't any bigger problem than our powers changing all of a sudden. I figured it could wait until morning."

"We need to go Mako." Cleo said.

"Can it wait until after breakfast?" Zane asked. "If I don't eat I might \_die\_."

Before Cleo could assure Zane that \_no \_he isn't going \_to die\_ without eating and try to get the fact they needed to get to Mako as soon as possible across to him Sam and Ryan came rushing into the kitchen. Their sudden appearance made Cleo sick to her stomach. She was half asleep when Don and Kim had come home late last night from the movies last night. When she woke up Cleo figured Sam had come home after them. Apparently not. Her and Ryan were dressed in the same clothes they'd left in last night, except now their clothes were covered in dirt and sand. They were damp in some places, as well.

"You'll never believe what happened last night." Ryan said breathlessly. "It wasâ€¦"

"Absolutelyâ€¦ magical." Sam finished, casting an excited glance at Ryan. "You'll never believe the pictures we got!"

Cleo and Emma and Rikki all turned to look at one another, panic sending their blood running cold.

In Lewis's arms, Elena began to cry.

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><p><strong>an:\*\* HOLY SHIT. LONG TIME NO UPDATE. this chapter really kicked my ass and i still don't like how it turned out, but i feel bad for making everyone wait so long. anyway! \*\*the game \*\*i promised you starts next chapter (which will be uploaded when i hit 80 reviews). \*\*here's how it works!; \*\*i'm going to sneak in a reference (either from a song or a tv show, i'll specify which one at the beginning of each chapter) and you've got to guess what the reference is! you get bonus points if you can tell me where it came from. i got the idea from a friend on instagram (and don't worry, i'll make it obvious-ish). but yes, please please please leave your thoughts in a review. :) it'll keep me updating quicker! \_coming up next chapter\_: we discover what sam and ryan discovered on mako island, the girls swim out to mako island and make some discoveries of their own, claire reunites with both ash and elena before meeting up with sophie, and will has a surprise in store for emma. oh, and one more character will be returning. muhaha. stay tuned! x

## 11. In The Aftermath

reference game; round one!



>you're looking for a [quote] from a [television show] that airs on [HBO], it's in the first paragraph.<p>

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><p>10. ÉªÉ´ á´>Êæá´‡ á´€Ò"á´>á´‡Ê€á´•á´€á´>Êæ<p>

"Ssh," Lewis soothed, setting the purple bottle aside as Elena began to fuss. He pulled her close to his chest and bounced her gently before pressing a kiss to her temple. "It's okay, little dove. Guess what? We're gonna go see mommy today."

"Yeah, because that's a comforting thought." Zane grumbled loudly. He just didn't understand, of all the women for Lewis to go and knock upâ€" - why \_Claire\_? That woman might as well be the devil reincarnate. Why couldn't it have been that nice bartender from his and Lewis's last trip to Melbourne? The one who knew her way around a deck of poker cards and a bottle of tequila. What was her name again? Angela? Amy? \_Whatever\_. \_It didn't matter. As long as she wasn't Claire.

"Claire isn't that bad, Zane." Lewis retorted, turning to look him in the face. Cradled in his arms, Elena had thankfully calmed down some. She'd resorted back to sucking her thumb, which told Lewis she was probably about to drift back into sleep. "She's just a little... damaged." \_Like me\_. "You don't know her like I do, okay? She's trying."

"If I knew her like you do I'd be getting myself tested."

Rikki managed a laugh at that.

"That's mature, Zane." Lewis chastised.

Zane snorted. "I'm just saying!"

"Enough you two," Cleo stated, more concerned with Sam and Ryan's apparently groundbreaking news. She turned her attention to Sam, trying to keep the overwhelming panic out of her voice. "Now what about those pictures, Sam?"

"There was this light!" Ryan began, gesturing wildly with his hands. "It was coming from the middle of the island. It was too dark and foggy for Sam and I to venture out there, but we got some pictures from the beach. We'll show you once we get them downloaded to the computer. It was this huge column of blue light that shot right into the sky! Then there were the tides. They pulled back so quickly and so suddenly... My God, it was so fast Cleo! And they went so far out! I can't even explain it, you've got to see the pictures. Whatever was going on... It wasn't natural. I can promise you that."

"And there was this wind," Sam added, nearly breathless with her excitement. "I thought for sure a tropical storm was blowing in. It was so strong and so hot, and the way the tides were pulling back along with itâ€| Like Ryan said, we've no words. It was lightning too, I think, unless that light column was flashing or pulsating or something. Ryan and I got video too. We're going to have a look at it as soon as work is through. Was it storming or anything here last night, Cleo?"

"Yeah," Lewis lied quickly, not giving Cleo a chance to answer. He could tell Cleo, even Emma and Rikki, were having a hard time to holding it together. Sam and Ryan seem to have found out much more than he expected them too. "It thundered pretty loudly. That's probably why Elena is so fussy, we didn't get much sleep last night. She isn't a fan of thunderstorms. Ya' know, out on Mako, you two were probably just seeing lightning, and as for the wind... Well, you remember last year's tropical storm don't you? It was all over the news. Almost became a hurricane."

"No." Ryan pressed, dark eyes glittering with determination. "This was no freak storm. I don't know what the hell it was, but it was something out of this world. Why don't you come out to Mako with us, Lewis? You spend almost as much time in a lab as I do. Don't tell me you're not curious."

And \_God\_ was Lewis curious, but he couldn't let Ryan know that. He needed to steer Ryan and Sam both in the opposite direction of Mako Island. Find a way to destroy their evidence, if he has to.

A strange tension filled the Sertori's kitchen and dining room. Bella and Zane were still sitting at the table, although Zane at least had the decency put his feet back on the floor where they belonged, and Emma was still going about the pancakes she was making, trying to act natural. Aside from Sam and Ryan and himself, Cleo and Rikki were they only ones who're really contributing to the conversation. Lewis understood what it was like, being chokedâ€"suffocatedâ€"by your own fear. \_Fear.\_ It was a word that made him think of his father John. Still to this day Lewis couldn't help but flinch when he heard the slamming of a door, his blood still ran cold when heard the shattering of a glass, the bellows of a raised voice...

"He'd love to!" Rikki said, giving Lewis a pat on the back. He nearly choked on his own spit. "I'm sure you two have exchanged numbers already, just give him a call whenever you two are heading out."

Lewis nodded and lied, again, through nearly gritted teeth. He was going to kill Rikki.\_ Kill her\_. "Sure, just give me a call. I'm busy today though, I'm meeting up with Claire."

"Give her my best," Sam said sympathetically. "I hope things work out."

"We best get to work anyway." Ryan said with a grin. "I'll call you tomorrow, Lewis. Oh, and I'll email you those pictures tonight! They'll blow your mind."

"I'm sure they will."

Sam and Ryan left then, Sam saying her and Ryan could just shower and change at work. They were all thankful for that. The sooner Sam and Ryan left, the better.

As soon as they were out the door Lewis was turning to Rikki. "What the hell was that, Rikki? I'd love to?"

"You're going to lead Sam and Ryan as far away from the moon pool as possible." Rikki stated, taking a sip of her orange juice. "I don't care what you have to do or say, just keep them away while me and

Cleo and Emma and Bella try and figure what's going on."

"I won't be of much help," Bella said from the table, something a lot like defeat lingering in her voice. "I'm blind, I can't see a thing."

"But you're smart." Emma pointed out. "Who cares if you can't see? You don't need your vision to be able to think." She was silent for a moment. "We need you, Bella. We're in this together, remember?"

"Emma's right." Cleo said. "We're in this together."

Bella smiled. "Thanks guys."

"Not a problem," Emma replied calmly. "Now, nobody is going anywhere until they've eaten. Mako can wait another half hour or so, besides... I'd think it'd be a good idea to wait until Sam and Ryan have gotten a little further down the road."

"Yeah," Rikki agreed. "We don't want to be there if they decide to make a surprise appearance."

"Is the food done?" Zane asked, quickly standing up and joining the girls in the kitchen. "I'm\_ starving\_."

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"Well," Rikki said forty five minutes later, after they'd all had their fill of Emma's infamous homemade pancakes. "It looks like it's time to go bite the bullet."

Cleo nodded, still incredibly anxious. "You don't think the water tentacle will come back, do you?"

"No," Lewis said, giving her a soft kiss. "You'll be fine. I promise."

"I wish you'd come with us."

"I'm meeting Claire today," He replied, somewhat sadly. "She really wants to see Elena and we've got some stuff to work out, but if anything happens don't hesitate to call or come find me, okay? Promise? I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Okay," Cleo promised, giving him a kiss back. The I love you she wanted so desperately to say stuck like a knot of worry in the back of her throat. "If anything happens, I'll call. Bye Lewis," She pressed a kiss to Elena's forehead. "Bye Laney, be good for daddy."

Still sucking on her thumb, Elena cooed at Cleo with heavy eyes. Though last night's thunderstorm had been a lie, the fact Lewis and Elena both got little sleep was not. Of course, not sleeping was nothing new to Lewis. Especially this past month.

Lewis bundled Elena up in a lightweight Little Mermaid blanket (it was going to be warm out and he didn't want her getting overheated) and secured her back in her carrier, then he packed up her diaper bag and slung it over his shoulder.

"Ready to go Zane?" He asked.

"Ugh, work," Zane groaned, reluctantly getting up from the kitchen table. "Yeah, yeah. I'm coming."

He gave Rikki a kiss goodbye, making sure to quietly tell her he loved her again, before following Lewis out the door. Before they'd come downstairs him and Rikki had decided to keep their \_I love you\_s private for now. Saying it was still felt so bright and new and warm, intimate. They weren't ready to share that yet.

"Ready to go?" Emma asked, a little unsure of herself. She wasn't the only one feeling lost.

"As ready as we'll ever be." Cleo replied, and then, with Bella holding Emma's hand, they headed out Cleo's back door and down to the shoreline.

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\_You can do this, Claire. You can do this. It's just a baby. Your baby. Ash will be here soon. You can do this. You can do this.\_

Claire didn't know how long she'd repeated that mantra in her head before Lewis showed up at her table. She couldn't even remember what time she showed up at the caf  . All Claire could focus on for the last however long was psyching herself up to seeing Elena. Jesus, how embarrassing would it be to spiral into some sort of nervous breakdown (can you even have a nervous breakdown while you're already \_in the middle of one?) when she held her daughter for the first time.

Claire felt like such a parental failure. Despite wanting to, she had yet to hold her one month old baby... but she just couldn't bring herself to. As much as she wanted that bond with her baby now, holding her and looking into her little eyes was still a terrifying prospect. Those terrible memories, those vivid nightmares, still loomed in the back of her mind. Elena's face had a habit of dragging them into the light, as did Lewis's.

"Hey." Lewis said warmly, sitting down in the chair next to her.

Claire swallowed thickly, eyes already damp. "Hi."

"You're going to be okay, ya' know." He replied. "I promise."

"Yeah. Okay. You're right. I got this."

Claire was a nervous wreck, still as a deer caught in the headlights, as Lewis set Elena in her anxiously waiting arms. He gently adjusted her hands so Elena's head would be supported before slowly sitting back in his chair.

"Wow." She breathed, trembling. Elena was a small, though warm and solid, weight. Her skin was so fair and soft, just as smooth as porcelain. "She's so small. She didn't feel this small when her feet were caught in my ribcage."

Lewis gave Claire's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "That's all over now."

She blinked a few times, refusing to look away from Elena's face in fear Lewis would see the tears gathered in her eyes—tears of fear and joy and shame and love and embarrassment. Her emotions wildly waged war inside her. Claire didn't know what she was feeling. On one hand warmth was flooding through her, a sort of love she'd only ever known with Ash, but on the other she was terrified, terrified she mess Elena up just as badly as her own mother and father messed her up. Lewis was sitting there next to her though, and that at least provided a sense of comfort. He was a good friend and an even better father (whereas she felt like a horrible friend and an even worse mother).

Finally, when seeing her own eyes reflected back from Elena's became a little too overwhelming, too much to bare, Claire looked at Lewis. He was smiling softly.

"How do I look?" She asked, stroking her thumb across Elena's cheek.

"Like a mother," He replied fondly. "Scared absolutely shitless."

Claire chuckled. "Tell me what you really think."

Elena smiled at Claire's chuckle. - "and then suddenly it was as though the world shifted on it's axis.

"Did you see that?!" Lewis asked excitedly. "You got her to smile!"

He laughed and Elena's smile widened. She's waved her arms and legs, feeling the excitement between the three of them. Claire held her daughter closer, confidence growing. Perhaps this wouldn't end as disastrously as she originally expected.

"I'm your mommy," She found herself saying, cursing herself inwardly as confused tears began to run down her cheeks. Her baby girl's first smile and she'd been the one to cause it. "I'm sorry I've not been with you. I'm, ugh, I'm pretty sick. In my head. But I'm going to be here from now on, okay? Or, at least, I'm going to try to be."

Claire hiccuped a quiet sob and brought Elena close to her chest, holding her tightly. "I'm so sorry baby. I'm sorry I called you a parasite and I'm sorry I'm so afraid. I love you. I do."

Lewis scooted his chair closer and pulled the two of them in for a hug.

"Everything is going to be okay now." He reassured her, setting his chin on top of her head. "It's going to be hard, but it's going to be okay."

"I'm sorry." Claire continued. "For everything, especially for what I said about you and your brother when I first moved in with you—"

Lewis cut her off. "It's fine. It's okay. That was months ago."

"No, I was way out of line. I was scared and I wanted to run and I was lashing out" - and" "

"Sssh, it's okay Claire. I'm sorry too. When you said you didn't want to stick around I got scared, I was afraid I was going to be left alone with this tiny little girl and" I don't know. For a while that thought really overwhelmed me. I said some things I didn't mean."

She chuckled again against his shoulder. "God, we are the last people on earth who should be reproducing."

When Lewis released her Claire felt, to her own surprise, much less anxious than when she'd arrived, as though things were finally starting to look up. Now all she needed to do was get Lewis's friends to like her, his girlfriend especially. she groaned inwardly, talk about a challenge. Claire had a strong hunch that Cleo viewed her as a threat to her relationship with Lewis and that was just \_not the case\_. Claire really wanted to grab Cleo by the shoulders and yell \_There is nothing romantic between me and Lewis, we're just friends raising our kid! Me and you can be friends too! I promise I'm not a threat! \_in her face. She wanted more than anything for them all to get along for Elena's sake, but Claire had a feeling they'd be hard to win over"- especially considering how horrid she'd been the last few months.

"- "Lewis?"

Claire and Lewis both looked away from Elena to find Ash standing in front of their table, looking gobsmacked. Claire handed Elena back to Lewis, who was looking just as stunned, before squealing and throwing herself at Ash. He embraced her with nothing less than a bear hug and Claire immediately sagged into the warmth of it. She couldn't believe how much she'd missed him.

"Hey Clairebear." He breathed.

She sniffled into his chest. "Hi bubby. I missed you. I missed you so much. It's been so bad."

"I know, I'm so sorry. I'm here now though," Ash said. "I'm here and I'm not going anywhere. I love you, you booger faced brat."

Claire pulled out of the hug and smiled wetly up at him. "So, d'you want to meet your niece?"

"Lewis." Ash acknowledged, ignoring Claire's question. He had a bad feeling in the pit of his gut.

"Ash." He responded. "Emma told me you weren't going to be back until tonight."

"I wanted to surprise her."

"Whoa whoa whoa," Claire began. "You two know each other? How do you know Emma?"

Ash knitted his eyebrows together, confused. "How do \_you\_ know Emma? And Lewis, for that matter?"

"Emma is friends with Lewis. Lewis is my baby daddy."

"Oh my God." Ash said flatly. "Oh my \_God, ew! \_Claire! Lewis! Seriously? Justâ€" - \_Ew!\_"

"Nice to see you too Ash." Lewis replied. "I've been great, thanks. How're you?"

"You had sex with my sister!" He exclaimed loudly, still in shock about the whole situation. Claire, his baby sister \_Claire \_whose diapers he used to help change, somehow found and managed to get knocked up by Lewis, \_Lewis \_who ran around with a bunch of mermaids, one of which Ash was planning on proposing to. ...His life. \_Seriously.\_

From behind the counter Lewis heard Zane nearly choke with laughter.

"Welcome to the family Ash!" He called, not looking away from the glass he was wiping down.

"Could you be a little louder?" Claire asked heatedly, though it was just a sliver of the hostility she'd shown the world during her pregnancy. "I don't think they heard you in Perth!" She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. "Okay. Ash, now that you're here, I'm going to go to have a chat with Sophie about a job. It shouldn't be more than twenty minutes or so, though. You and Lewis can catch up." She paused and smiled at him. "We got Elena to smile for the first time. See if you boys can get her to do it again."

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Emma couldn't remember a time when swimming to Mako had felt so scary. She didn't think she'd ever swam so fast. Who knew what they'd find when they arrived? Would the moon pool be destroyed? What on earth was that blue light Ryan and Sam were talking about? And what about that awful freak storm?

Emma was still holding tight to Bella's hand, guiding her through the water. She didn't understand what compelled her to be so protective of Bella, especially considering just how secretive and withdrawn she'd been, but there was a part of Emma that longed to help the newly blinded mermaid. She could tell Bella has been trying to be inclusive, not wanting Emma to feel left out or replaced, but Emma noticed the light in Bella's smiles never quite reached her eyes. There was something lurking just beneath. Something Emma wanted to learn about more than anything.

Nothing could've prepared the Emma, Bella, Cleo, and Rikki for what they came across when they surfaced in the moon pool.

"What's wrong?" Bella asked, hearing Cleo and Emma and Rikki's sudden intake of breath. Although that could've been because the air in the moon pool was unusually humid. It felt as though they were all breathing through a sponge.

"The moon poolâ€|" Emma said, squeezing Bella's hand. "It's in

ruins."

\_In ruins \_was an understatement. The water in the pool itself was down considerably, nearly six inches, and the cave itself was covered in large pieces of broken rock. It looked as though there'd been an earthquake of some sort. There were also patches of sand that had been heated into glass. \_Glass\_.

"It must've been the light Ryan was talking about." Rikki added distantly, stunned. "I can't believe this."

"It could've been the storm too, I guess." Cleo added, glancing around with wet eyes. "\_If \_what they were talking about even was a storm. I can't think of anything else that could've done this."

"So it was either the freaky magic light or the freaky magic storm? That's great. Just fantastic." Rikki groused.

"Or," Emma began hesitantly. "Maybe Sam and Ryan weren't the only ones out here last night."

"I think I'm going to be sick." Bella said, clutching at Emma's arm.

"It's going to be okay Bella," Cleo tried to reassure her, though it sounded as though she was trying to convince herself as well. "We'll figure this out. Somehow."

"No, I mean I'm really going to be sick. It's too hot in here and I've got cold chills and â€" and â€"-"

Before Bella could finish her sentence she dry heaved once, twice, three times before vomiting all over the rock.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>an:\*\* and there you have it! chapter ten! hope everyone enjoyed. :) sorry it's a little on the long side. coming up next: what's wrong with bella? is she alright? and what happened to the moon pool? was it the freak "storm" that destroyed the pool, or someone from the past? and what will the storm do to the girls' already haywire powers and new tails? how will the meeting with claire and sophie go? how will lewis and ash's reunion go? and just where is will in all this? the surprise for emma got pushed back to next chapter, don't worry. ;) ash and the girls reunite next chapter as well! lots of goodies are in store. there is also going to be some wella and clewis moments next chapter (sorry those are spread thin, this is going to be be more zikki-centric), also claire and bella will have a chat. stay tuned. next update is at 90 reviews. :) we're so close to 100. :D x

## 12. Diamonds and Rust

\*\*note:\*\* due to reasons explained in the author's note at the bottom, this chapter is going to be pretty short and a little on the rushed side. i really wanted to get this updated though. sorry darlings, next chapter will be 3,000 words minimum to make up for it. :) thanks for 91 reviews! next update at 100. :)



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><p>11. á'...Éªá'€á'•á'•É'á'...s á'€É'á'... Ê€á'æså'><p>

Bella awoke in the sand, fully human. Her head was swimming with pain and felt cloudy. She panicked for a brief moment, unsure of where she was or if she was alone, until she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay Bella," Came Emma's voice. Relief washed over Bella, like aloe on a sunburn. "We're here."

"What happened? Where am I?" She asked quickly, confused.

"The moon pool," Emma continued, brushing a few stray strands of honey blonde from her friend's eyes. "You got sickâ€"really sick, then you passed out again."

"Enough is enough," Rikki started, hiding her deep concern behind a mask of annoyance. "What's going on with you, Bella? Why are you so sick all of the time now?"

Bella slowly pulled herself up into a sitting position. Embarrassed and trembling like a leaf in the wind, she exhaled shakily and prepared herself for confession. It wasn't fair to keep Cleo and Emma and Rikki in the dark, not now that her symptoms seemed to be worsening and she was (unintentionally) burdening everyone with them.

"A month and a half ago," She began. "My mum took me to the doctor because I was having a lot of migraines. Really bad ones. She thought I might have some sort of headache disorder since those run in our family. It's not, though. I'veâ€| I've got a brain tumor."

Silence, tense as a drawn bow, fell between the four of them.

"What?" Cleo asked, her voice little more than a high pitched squeak. She already had tears welled in her eyes, threatening to spill over. "No. Bella, no! There has to be a mistake."

Bella shook her head. "I saw the X Rays. It's a tumor. They've been giving me a lot of different medication to manage the seizures and headaches and stuff, and I start radiation therapy next week. If that doesn't work I'm going to have to have surgery to remove it." She was quiet for a second. "I'm sorry I've been keeping things from you. Lying. I didn't want you to worry."

Cleo tugged Bella in for a tight hug.

"I'm so sorry Bella," Emma said, joining in on the hug. She felt Bella's trembling intensify as she began to cry, fearful and ashamed. "It's okay. We'll get you through this."

Meanwhile, Rikki sat awkwardly off to the side. She didn't say anything, mostly because she didn't know what to say and, even if she did, Rikki feared she start crying if she opened her mouth. Or even moved. A brain tumor. Bella had a brain tumor. That was almost as bad as cancer! It was cancer, essentially. Rikki continued to sit there numbly and Cleo and Emma held onto Bella and let her

breakdown.

God, poor Bella" - she'd been robbed of her sight, her confidence, her freedom, and now quite possibly her very life.

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It was a silent walk back to the caf ; Cleo kept an arm around Bella's shoulders and Emma was holding Bella's hand. Rikki walked alongside them, lost in her jumbled thoughts. When they arrived at \_Rikki's\_, \_however\_, Emma squealed the second she saw Ash sitting next to Lewis. She let go of Bella's hand and ran to him without a second thought, nearly leaping into his lap as she embraced him.

"Ash!" She cried excitedly. "Oh my Gosh, I thought you weren't coming until later!"

He chuckled into her hair. "I was going to surprise you tonight. I even have a surprise for you in the car."

Emma beamed and kissed his mouth.

"I've got a surprise for you too," She said quietly. "We've got a new mermaid."

Ash raised his eyebrows. "What?"

"Yeah, her name is Bella." Emma gestured toward the others, her mood beginning to deplete as she remembered the silent journey to the caf . Her excitement over Ash's return couldn't heal the hurt Bella's news brought on. Cleo and Rikki pulled a couple chairs over to the table so they and Bella could join Emma, Ash, and Lewis. In Lewis's arms Elena babbled happily, her little arms waving. Lewis pressed a kiss to her temple and Cleo's heart melted.

"Hi!" Bella chirped, forcing herself to put on a smile. She wasn't going to let her disease, \_her\_ \_cancer\_, ruin Ash's return. He obviously meant a lot to the group. It quietly dawned on her she'd never know what Ash looked like. The thought made her heart sink. "I'm Bella, the other  Well, you know."

"I'm Ash," He greeted. It sounded like he was smiling. "Emma's boyfriend."

"It's great to finally meet you. Emma hasn't shut up about you since you called."

Ash chuckled. It was a warm sound. "Glad to see I'm still the favorite."

Bella was about to tentatively ask if Ash could describe what he looked like to her when Claire came sauntering over. Everyone subconsciously held their breath, unsure if a shouting match between her and Lewis was about to break out or if Claire was just going to snip something defensive and rude.

"I need to borrow Bella," She said. "It's important."

"What do you need \_me\_ \_for?" Bella asked, confused.

"I'm trying to save your job." Claire stated, folding her arms across her chest. "Sophie is gettingâ€¦ impatient with your condition. I told her she was being insensitive and she told me sensitivity doesn't pay the bills."

Rikki narrowed her eyes. "And what do you have to do Bella's job?"

"Sophie wants me as Bella's replacement. I told her no, not unless Bella sings with me."

"What?" Bella asked, dumbfounded.

"Look, I need the money now that I've got a plus one," Claire gestured toward Elena, causing the little one to wave her arms again and coo. "But I'm not going to take Sophie up on her offer if it knocks Bella on her ass. Her voice is twice as good as mine."

It seemed that, for the second time that day, everyone was shocked into silence.

Claire sighed. "Look; you don't have to like me, okay? I'd like you to for Elena's sake, but I know I've been a total nightmare. I'm sorry for that, and I know I can probably never fix the trouble I've caused, but I'd like to try. Bella, please come back to Zane's office with me so I can save your job."

"â€¦but I'm blind."

"Who gives a shit if your blind? You're still the same person you've always been, voice and all. You don't need to see. Just get yourself an eye dog and you'll be golden. Don't try and play and the victim, it'll only make you look weak. Now, Bella, do you want to sing or what?"

"I don't trust you." Rikki stated suddenly, leaning forward in her seat. "I don't trust you and I don't like you and I don't want you doing anything for us. We're not going to owe you anything.."

"Good for you," Claire retorted in a snap. "I wasn't talking to you though, was I? I was talking to Bella. She's got a mind of her own. â€¦and for your information, Rikki, I wouldn't want anything from you anyway. I'm trying to help Bella because she has been through hell and doesn't need anymore." I know what it's like to feel so helpless, goes unsaid, Ash and I never had anyone. \_

><em>

"Claireâ€¦" Ash began in a warning tone. He knew Claire really did want to make amends, but she had a dangerous habit of speaking before she thought and getting defensive over the most trivial of things.

"Stay out of it, bub." She snipped, turning back to Bella. "Bella, c'mon. Don't make me beg."

Bella was silent for a minute, contemplating her options.

"Don't tell me you're seriously considering this." Rikki continued angrily.

"Okay," Bella began, ignoring Rikki. She stood up and tucked a strand of honey blonde hair behind her ear. "Okay. Let's go."

Claire smiled, took Bella by the arm, and proceeded to lead her back to Zane's office.

:::

"How do you know Claire?" Emma asked. It came out a little more defensively than she'd liked.

"She's just my sister," Ash shrugged, tightening his arms around Emma's midsection. "I know she can be... abrasive, but give her a break, okay? We've been through a lot, especially her."

"Your sister?!" Her and Cleo both exclaimed. No way. There was no way Ash was Claire's brother. He was so sweet, so kind. and Claire was so Claire. A total wild child.

"Ugh, yeah? Which makes Elena my niece. It also gives me the brotherly right to bury Lewis's dismembered body in my backyard."

"Someone's been watching the ID Channel." Lewis commented.

"I swear to God, Lewis. I swear to God."

"How was I supposed to know she was your sister? I don't even see why it matters. It isn't like we're going to hold hands and run off into the sunset together."

Ash narrowed his eyes and huffed. "You aren't supposed to sleep with women you've known for twenty minutes!"

Lewis blinked at him. "Don't be a slut shamer, Ash. Whatever happened to feminism?"

Ash pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. It was too early in the morning for this. He just wanted to catch up with his darling Emma. "Me and you? We're going to have a talk later. A long one."

"You do realize I don't get much free time now, right? Little princess here is very demanding."

Ash wanted to be mad. God did he want to be mad, but Elena had to be the most precious thing he'd ever laid eyes on. She was a happy baby, cooing and waving her arms and grinning at the big world around her. He could tell she had Claire's beautiful eyes right off the bat (eyes that often got his baby sister into trouble, she knew how to wield them like swords). Something like pride bubbled in his chest and Ash found himself starting to smile and no, goddammit. He's supposed to be angry.

Claire came sauntering back to the table with an arm thrown around Bella's shoulders, drawing the table's attention away from Elena and toward them.

"Go ahead Ash," Claire began, pulling up a chair. "Tell me how

perfect I am."

He rolled his eyes, playfully exasperated. "What'd you do?"

"We're partners now," Bella replied happily. - " and whoa, why was Bella so happy about \_that\_? First Ash and Claire, now this... Cleo was starting to feel like she was in The Twilight Zone. "Your sister is very persuasive."

Claire beamed and reached for Elena. "I told you Sophie would listen to me," She adjusted her daughter in her arms the way Lewis had earlier shown her. "You've just got to think like she does."

"I'm going to go talk to Zane." Rikki said rudely, standing up.

Claire just smiled, enjoying way Elena felt curled in her arms. There was still panic stirring within her chest, but Claire did her best to push it back. "Go ahead, Rikki. He's just as on board as Sophie is." A beat of silence stretched out between them. "Ya' know, for a while I really thought you were Bella's friend. Obviously not."

Rikki glared sharply before marching off to her office, prepared to give Zane the reaming of a lifetime. Cleo chased after her.

In her arms, Elena grinned again and reached for Claire's face. Claire pressed a kiss to her tiny palm.

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Done.

It was finally done.

Will peered down wearily at the moon crystal necklace in his hands, freshly made. Worried she'd feel left out, it had been Bella's idea to make Emma a necklace like hers and Cleo's and Rikki's, although Will couldn't help but feel a little bit sad now that it was finished. Bella would never see her new friend's face when she received the gift, she'd never see the way the sunlight glinted off the stone in the sunshine, never see the way the crystal looked submerged in seawater and surrounded by an ocean of color and life. Poor Bella. She'd never see anything again. Will wiped the sudden mistiness from his eyes. Why Bella? Why couldn't it have been \_him\_ to go blind? Bella didn't deserve this. She deserved the world and then some.

He felt so pissed off, drowning in his own grief " - \_why Bella? \_Why his beautiful Bella?

Will was suddenly struck with an idea. He grinned brightly, shoved the necklace in his pocket, grabbed his wallet from where it laid haphazardly on his bed, and rushed out the door.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>an\*\*: LUCY GOT THE REFERENCE! It was from HBO's Game of Thrones, "little dove" as often quoted by Cersei Lannister. I know that one was a little tough but I had my reasons. :p While Cersei and Lewis are complete opposites in every sense of the word, they do have

one similarity that fell into theme with this ficâ€”- their devotion to their family and the fact they'd do \_anything \_to protect their blood. I'll do round two, an easier one, next chapter. :) \*\*I'M SO SORRY THIS CHAPTER IS SO RUSHED AND LATE. \*\*A family emergency popped up and I had to catch a couple flights and yeah. :i Sorry. The next chapter won't be total shit haha.

COMING UP NEXT CHAPTER: Rikki and Zane's relationship is completely altered by their heat of the moment fight and Rikki has a difficult choice to make, Bella and Claire have their first rehearsal together and Bella struggles in an unexpected way, Will's sudden idea is revealed, Cleo and Lewis finally get some bonding time, Emma and Ash go on their moonlit date, and Kim makes a discovery all her own. Stay tuned!

End  
file.